

We've had a good war – so far. Perhaps a 'phoney' war. Listening to a business man yesterday, and several other neighbours and friends recently, it's been interesting to hear the tendency by some towards hope and the tendency of others towards anguish and, in some sense, and arguably all, this tussle within each of them as to which of the major narratives to believe or, at least, promote. This is not a new tension: in a wonderful book telling 'stories in Romanesque carving' *The Villein's Bible* by Brian Young, the author notes that

Stories of forgiveness and mercy do not seem to have appealed as much in medieval iconography as those parables which gave dire warnings.

(p.86)

And earlier he'd noted that

Wild landscape has small appeal in earlier medieval times (for love of Nature is a luxury usually reserved for those who no longer find natural forms a threat to peace of body and mind) (p. 67)

Hard times and hard living perhaps inevitably produce a harder stance towards the future and one wonders whether the hope underlying our present circumstances isn't a luxury of the rich, including contemplatives such as ourselves : we are not the ones who will be losing our jobs. This, in turn, may be a hard stance – survivors guilt already. But if Brian Young can call out this tendency towards one or other narrative it's because the Bible has both – indeed, it's the grist in the mill, the central theme of the Bible narrative, the tussle at the heart of being human. Jeremiah's lament parallels many psalms in suddenly switching from lament to praise but this doesn't mean he has changed his narrative: suffering will come but, to those who stay true to God, salvation also. What is at issue for us as Christians is not a matter of being optimistic or pessimistic with regard to our material fate but of remaining true to the narrative of hope and redemption embodied in Christ whatever happens to us now. Paul presents this in the widest perspective possible; the whole story from Adam to its end in Christ. Death symbolises our stance of disobedience but still awaits both the good and the bad, believer and unbeliever alike; it's our attitude towards Christ, towards God, which changes this narrative from one of despair to hope. Yes, death will come – but life too. Matthew put this in the stark terms of a confessional faith; we must say what we believe; we must declare Christ in the presence of others. One can then go on to argue this out in terms of word or deed but the central premise (or promise) remains: we can have hope whatever our present circumstances because Christ is proof that God cares for us down to the smallest detail of our lives. Do not be afraid: this present life is passing.

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