

## People of Hope

Commenting on today's Gospel reading (the beatitudes according to Luke) the poet and priest Malcolm Guite asks, *What are we to make of it? ... It is not in itself blessed to be poor or hungry*; yet Jesus declares people in those conditions to be blest. *Everything turns*, says Guite, *on the movement in these verses from 'now' to 'will' ... you weep now, but you will laugh*; everything turns on the hinge of hope.

That final poetic phrase is helpful: maybe the beatitudes are, amongst other things, about hope. Jesus could be saying, *Blessed are those who have something to hope for*. The hungry hope to be filled; those who weep hope that one day they will laugh. Those who are reviled for their faith hope ultimately to be vindicated.

In contrast, those who are full, or rich, have little to hope for, beyond staying rich, or getting even richer. It's interesting that laughter features in Jesus' list of woes – is it just a convenient opposite to weeping? Laughter is something prized in our culture – and I acknowledge sharing in that. But I do wonder if it is over-prized: are there times when laughter is deployed as a means of avoiding serious issues? What do we think of someone who is always laughing? Human experience isn't like that: do we suspect a certain insincerity? What do those who laugh have to hope for? asks Jesus.

Not everyone who is poor, hungry or weeping is hopeful. We can be trapped by despair: thinking that things will never be different. Indeed, it can be argued that it is in the selfish interest of the rich or powerful to promote amongst the poor the idea that things will never be different: knuckle down and accept your lot. Not so, said those who campaigned for the abolition of slavery, for workers' rights, or for land and trade justice today: things don't have to stay as they are. *Everything turns on the movement from 'now' to 'will.'* Jesus speaks these words, Malcolm Guite continues, *to lift the veil of time just enough to help us see*. That in the future things can, no, will be different.

In our Old Testament reading, Daniel is terrified by the vision he receives. For brevity, the lectionary spares us the detail: four great beasts, each in turn coming up out of the sea to dominate or to devour. Yet the meaning of this vision also *turns on the hinge of hope*.

Although Daniel appears in our bibles among the prophets, the genre of the book is best described not as prophecy, but as its derivative, apocalyptic. In today's short extract, the features of a dream; allegorical characters (the beasts); an interpreting angel; and a vision of the future are all characteristic of an apocalypse. Revelation is a New Testament example – no surprise that book draws on Daniel. Apocalypses were written, rather than spoken (they often feature scrolls): written to offer hope to people of faith who seemed to be trapped in the political realities and constraints of their time. Their coded language and images indicate a subversive literature (the scrolls are often sealed) intended only for those who, as a result of their faith, possess the key to their interpretation.

The book of Daniel purports to be set in the era of the Babylonian Empire (the first of the four beast in Daniel's vision) yet all the evidence points to a work written for those suffering suppression by the Greek Empire (the fourth beast). However much these empires (and the Roman which followed them) promoted the myth that they would endure, the message of the vision is that they would not: rather, it is *the holy ones (saints) of the Most High* who receive a kingdom from God *to possess for ever*. The apocalypse *lifts the veil of time just enough* to help its recipients see over the horizon.

As Daniel's saints and the blessed ones of Jesus' beatitudes, we are to lay hold of that eternal perspective. We know and inhabit the reality of the *now*; but we have also been granted, by faith, the reality of the *will*. *All shall be well*, wrote Julian of Norwich, ... *and all manner of thing shall be well*. Jesus is himself a hinge of hope – in Christian terms, *the* hinge of hope. He embraced his death for us in the *now* of his incarnation – to reveal the *will* eternally present in his resurrection.

And that movement from *now* to *will* is evidenced in diverse ways in the lives of the saints. Those who evidenced in the *now* of their earthly lives – or deaths – the *will* of the life of God's kingdom. We, with all the holy ones of God, spanning geography and time, are people of hope. And our churches are to be communities of hope – even if they don't appear to be successful. I wonder if Jesus could have added, *Woe to you who are successful: you have your reward already?* Not that success, like laughter, is necessarily a bad thing. But it's not what characterises us. We are blest by having something to hope for.