

THE BASIS OF HOPE

Ted Schroder, Palm/Passion Sunday, 2010

Who do you trust? On what can you depend for the future? What is your basis for hope?

Stephen Green is a unique person. He is chairman of HSBC, the UK's largest banking corporation, where he was CEO from 2003 to 2006. He has worked with HSBC since 1982. He has also been an ordained clergyman in the Church of England since 1988. Chairman of the British Bankers' Association, he is also chair of the Prime Minister's Business Council and a trustee of the British Museum. He has written *Good Value: Reflections on Money, Morality and an Uncertain World*, published this year. In his Introduction he writes:

"We are at one of those moments in history when it seems as if the tectonic plates are shifting. We are living through years in which a crisis has overtaken our increasingly globalized world, such as most of us have not seen in our lifetimes. The questions strike at the root of what we have taken for granted for at least a quarter of a century. There has been a massive breakdown of trust: trust in the financial system, trust in bankers, trust in business, trust in business leaders, trust in politicians, trust in the media, trust in the whole process of globalization – all have been seriously damaged, in rich countries and in poor countries alike. And if trust has been broken in this way, where do we go from here?" (xi)

Green goes on to review how we have arrived at the place where we are in terms of world financial history. He exposes our tendency to compartmentalize our work and personal lives that is spiritually and morally dangerous. "We need to connect our metaphysical and moral framework – what we worship, what we admire, what we hold dear, what we hold to be right – with what we think about the world and what we do and should do." (210)

As a Christian, he sees humanity as both infinitely precious and perennially wayward, forever striving after the vanities of life, for that which is transient and cannot satisfy. We simultaneously bear the mark of original grace and original sin. This ambiguity "seems to be with us always, and it underlies our personal disappointment with ourselves, our awareness of ideals we fall short of, our sense of injustice and wrong (in others and ourselves), our sense of dissatisfaction and transience, our awareness of the reality of evil. (220)

Yet, in all this awareness, amid disappointment and in the teeth of the evidence, hope shows its face. What is the basis of this irrational hope for the future? "Through a Christian prism, I have to interpret the history and find the basis for that hope in one central image above all." It is the cross.

"For many its significance is barely understood and elicits less recognition than the Golden Arches (which are now more ubiquitous). For some its significance is vitiated by history (its association with the crusades in the Middle East, for example). For others it serves as a talisman and/or badge of identity over and against others – witness for example, the sight in the 1990's of the Serbians fighting in Bosnia wearing crucifixes prominently around their necks.

But the cross was in fact an instrument of execution – and a commonplace one at that. We have forgotten how shocking it must have been to take this instrument as a sign for a new movement, as a sign of hope. As this movement's leader and inspiration is put

to death on this device, he cried out two things that show us just how extraordinary this sign of hope is. ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ This bleak cry takes us to the very limit of the experience of failure, despair and loneliness. Many of us have had or will have had the experience: and even those of us who don’t know many that do....Then there is that final cry: according to John’s Gospel, ‘It is finished!’ – actually, ‘It is accomplished’ – even in the moment of death. What on earth could it mean – at that particular moment? ...Millions of words have been written down the centuries of Christian history on the significance of that death. Different perspectives, different theories have sought to articulate and explain it. I doubt if I could ever plumb its depths fully. And, in any case, however we seek to describe it theologically, it is of no account if it does not strike us at the centre of our being. And I cannot see how it can do that without becoming *the* prism of hope through which we see ourselves and our world – hope that persists in the midst of anything that human experience offers up, on the grounds of what was accomplished there, at that point of time.” (228,229)

How does Jesus on the cross, represent both our sinfulness, our alienation from God, and atonement – accomplishing our forgiveness and reconciliation? How is the cross such a basis of hope? What is its relevance to the history of the world?

In Revelation 5 John wept and wept because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or look inside the scroll, containing the book of history and destiny. Then one of the elders said, “Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.”

“Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne.... He came and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne. And when he had taken it, representatives all creation and the people of God fell down before the Lamb and they sang a new song:

‘You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.’” (Revelation 5:4-9)

The Lamb, who came to take away the sins of the world, by his death on the cross, took all the sin and evil on himself, and experienced the awfulness of judgment and hell, the breakdown of trust between humanity and God, and accomplished our salvation. “No other historical event (whether personal or global) can override or disprove the cross. This must surely be why the scroll (the book of history and destiny) is now in the hands of the slain Lamb, and why only he is worthy to break its seals, reveal its contents and control the flow of the future.” (John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 329)

“Only he is worthy to.... control the flow of the future.” As we face the future, only Christ and his cross can give us hope. Hope that we are going somewhere good despite the evil in the world. Hope that will endure even in the darkest times in human history. Not naïve hope, but real hope that we can truly believe in. Not a material hope of a kind that holds that life will get better or that progress is inevitable. But hope that Christ can control the flow of the future. And, when trust in people and institutions is broken, we *can* trust in the Lamb who was slain on the cross for our good, for our salvation. Jesus said, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me.” (John 14:1)

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