

AHEAD OF OUR TIME

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1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8,19-28; Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11

We sometimes hear it said of someone that he or she “was ahead of their time.” It usually means that there is something about the person’s ideas or actions that later is considered normal, but which at the time was innovative or non-conformist. It is usually meant as a compliment, but in retrospect by people of a later era. In their own time, they usually just seem a bit odd or eccentric or perhaps troublesome. Others are not usually so impressed at the time. Instead of describing you admiringly as being ahead of your time, they are more likely to sneer, “You’re getting a bit ahead of yourself, aren’t you?” It has a rather different feel, doesn’t it?

Part of the message of the season of Advent is that Christians are to be people who live ahead of their time. We are to begin living now in ways that will one day become normal; in ways which will one day make sense, but which don’t seem to quite fit in our present situation.

When Paul wrote to the Christians in Thessalonica and told them to rejoice and celebrate always, and be thankful in all circumstances, it would have made no sense at all if the only reference point was their present circumstances. The Thessalonian Christians were having a tough time with much hostility and abusive treatment from others. Paul is not advocating some kind of masochistic pleasure in the present pain. Rather he is calling us to look beyond it and see that there is nevertheless much to celebrate.

He is asking us to do something that nowadays has a popular term, “**reframing**”. Sometimes how you feel about something, or react to it, is dependent on the size of the frame you draw around it.

If you are experiencing serious pain in your chest, and you just focus on the immediate experience of the pain, then you may feel fearful and despondent. But if you focus on the fact that yesterday you had a life-saving heart transplant, and the present pain is a short-term side effect of the surgery, then your dominant feeling is more likely to be relief and joy. It is all a matter of how wide you draw the frame.

We reframe things quite naturally in ordinary conversation. You’ll hear someone say, “There’s just been this terrible catastrophe in which 3 people died, and you think that the Springboks losing to NZ is the worst news of the year.” Reframing!

Are you looking at the big picture or the small? Which dominates the way you feel about life and the world around you? Of course, in that example it is saying that the big picture is actually worse than the trivialities of what you are preoccupied with, while Paul is asking us to draw the frame bigger again until we see a picture worth kicking up our heels and celebrating over.

Interestingly, **John the baptiser** does something quite similar when what may be called “The Inquisition of Jerusalem” comes out to demand some answers from him. When they ask him why on earth he is baptising people – if he is not the Messiah, not the reincarnation of Elijah, and not the prophet like Moses – he doesn’t actually answer their question, but he reframes it.

In effect he says, “Look, you lot are so focussed on me that you are missing the bigger picture. I am just giving people a symbolic bath, but right there in the midst of you – rubbing shoulders with you even – is one you haven’t even noticed, let alone recognised. He is the One who is coming to take over where I leave off, and let me tell you that when he gets into action, you’ll be wondering why you wasted your time worrying about anything as insignificant as what I’m up to. All I’m here to do is point to the bigger picture, and you haven’t looked any further than person doing the pointing!”

Isaiah too is on the same sort of track. “The Lord has filled me with the Holy Spirit and sent me to bring good news to the downtrodden, to announce freedom to the prisoners, and to heal the broken-hearted.”

It doesn’t say he is sent to break the captives out of detention centres, but to preach a message of freedom; to reframe the situation; to enable them, and their oppressors, to see beyond the barbed wire and to catch a glimpse of the coming day of the Lord when those who have sown in tears will reap great rewards, singing and dancing and laughing; when those who have been trampled down and known nothing but despair will be lifted up rejoicing and made strong like great big trees planted by the Lord.

Reframing. Looking at the bigger picture and allowing that picture to determine how we will live and act here, and now. Rejoice and celebrate always, and be thankful in all circumstances, because when you look at the bigger picture of what God is coming to do, you can see that the pain of the present will not have the last word. It is just a step on the way to a great new reality. As Paul put it in another letter of his, you begin to see the pain of the present as the labour pains of creation as it brings the new reality to birth. And as most mothers will tell you, the ultimate experience of reframing is the way the pain of labour is dealt with both in anticipation of birth, and after it.

This is not about escapism! It is not a minimising of very real suffering, and it is not pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die as a way of muting the protest about the pain and injustice of the present. Rather it is an active and potent protest against the harsh realities of the present, and an aggressive refusal to let the present totally dictate the terms and conditions of our lives. It is a confident assertion that the war against injustice has already been won, and that the only reason we are still seeing it is that we are living in the period between the announcement of God’s victory in Christ and the full implementation of “post-war peace conditions” that is yet to come.

During the South African civil struggle, one of the people who phrased it so eloquently was Desmond Tutu, in saying that God’s people are “Prisoners of Hope”, that we cannot BUT hope because of our trust in God, both for this world and for the world to come.

We are called to be a people who are ahead of our time, who can celebrate now the coming of the reign of peace that we have glimpsed and tasted as it drew near to us in the one who suffered the worst the world can do, but rose from the cross above it and drew around it a new and bigger frame of resurrection life and the joyous freedom of the reign of God.

Others may sneer and say that we're getting a bit ahead of ourselves, but they've always said that about people who were ahead of their time. And joyous hope is contagious. It is our refusal to let the powers of death dictate our lives, and our insistence on looking at and celebrating the bigger picture of the tomb-breaking power of love, that will inspire and empower others to join us in making straight the way of the Lord and celebrating the coming of the one who brings us home singing, laughing and holding high the harvest of eternal joy.

Prayer:

We give you joyful thanks at all times, God,
for you have turned our grief into songs of joy,
and clothed us in salvation and victory.

You planted the earth and all life,
and called a people to be your light in the world.
When they were taken weeping into exile,
you promised through your prophets
to bring them home to Zion, singing and laughing.

Salvation has come in your Messiah, Jesus.
Your servant, John, bore witness to his coming light.

Filled with your Spirit,
Jesus came proclaiming good news for the poor,
healing for the broken hearted,
and the day of freedom to all in bondage.

He was killed by the proud and powerful,
but with your wonderful power you raised him to life.
In his presence we are filled with expectant hope and joy,
and eager to embrace your eternal covenant.

Therefore, with our hearts lifted high,
we offer you thanks and praise at all times
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.
Amen.
