

# On Hope in the Digital Age

*Assembly by Chris Eldridge, Head of History, June 2022*

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Preceded by a reading from St Paul's Letter to the Romans, Chapter 5, beginning at the first verse:

*'Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace with which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance character, and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit whom he has given us.'*

Good morning,

A fortnight ago I was thinking about writing this sermon on a shopping trip to Weston-Super-Mare of all places. I was thinking that I would like to talk about something involving social media and I had a rather alarming revelation. Pretty much everything I did or saw on the journey would make somebody on social media angry. I broke it down:

- I was funding the trip using wages I earn working for an independent school which makes me a class enemy in the eyes of some socialists.
- I was driving a car which makes me a climate criminal to some environmentalists.
- I was using an actual shop, not buying on line, which would make Jeff Bezos angry.
- On my journey I had to stop to let a herd of cows cross the road, cue militant vegans attacking the farmer for daring to make money out of exploiting animals.
- On the radio I was listening to woman's hour on Radio 4, the mere existence of which makes anti-feminists angry.
- They chose to include a lecture by Zadie Smith, a black British author, which would make some racists angry.
- Finding I was running late (those cows) I decided to stop at a fish and chip shop for an early tea. I had steak and kidney pie which would upset the vegans again and chips which would upset the anti-cholesterol lobby...

Thus had I shared the events of my journey on social media (I wouldn't because it wasn't very exciting) I could conceivably have attracted hate from angry socialists, environmentalists, Jeff Bezos, vegans (twice), anti-feminists, racists and doctors. All in the space of a very ordinary four hours on a Saturday afternoon.

Now I have the virtues (or perhaps vices) of being bloody minded, technologically incompetent and utterly uninterested in social media, and therefore disapproval of my life by people on it means absolutely nothing to me.

But the situation I have outlined is all too real to many of you. You have grown up much more digitally connected than I have, as teenagers you are statistically more likely to care what other people think about you, and you're fundamentally decent people who want to do the right thing. Thanks to this cocktail you are more judged, more criticised and the subject of more relentless external pressure than any generation in history. Unsurprisingly you're also much more likely to suffer from anxiety, depression and a whole host of other mental issues than your predecessors. You are in fact being invited 24 hours a day to embrace nihilism – the belief that life is a grim, futile existence with no hope. This is wrong. Utterly, totally and completely wrong. Nobody has the right to make you feel this way for any reason. So why do they do it?

Firstly I think it's a combination of factors compounded by two technological issues – the universal pressure of social media and the connected fact that traditional media like newspapers are dying, their circulation in a downward fatal spiral. In the vast electronic seas of social media, a permanent arms race for attention is waged between influencers with statements that tend towards the extreme and apocalyptic naturally gaining more publicity. Concurrently, as the mainstream media compete viciously for their share of a permanently shrinking market they too have embraced extremes. Media doom mongers must therefore bear their responsibility for this nihilism as it is done so consciously and for the purpose of personal enrichment. Impelled by the belief that bad news sells, they have in effect commercialised human anxiety.

Secondly, there are those who genuinely believe that we are doomed and in judging them we need to tread carefully. They do spread nihilism but do so because despair is part of who they are. It would, for instance, be disingenuous and plain wrong to attack the motives of young climate protestors such as Greta Thunberg but it is also true that for many the message they spread has created despair, not a determination to change the world for the better. Many universities, for example, now have to run special counselling groups for students who are so convinced that climate change will doom their future that they have lost any hope for the present.

It is right to worry about the world around you – it shows compassion and intelligence. There are things about the 21st century which are worrying – climate change is a real issue and needs to be addressed, as we know there is a horrible war waging in Ukraine, whilst in the UK the cost of living is an increasing difficulty for millions.

Yet none of these problems will be solved by nihilism – all despair mongering does is provoke division, desperation and at the end passivity: if we're already doomed, what's the point of even trying? Moreover, a nihilistic fixation with one issue can blind you to others – to take one example, it is essential that climate change protestors seeking carbon neutrality do not ignore the fears of the poorest in our society who fear that the cost of such measures will make their already difficult lives harder still.

## What is the solution?

Twofold – Firstly a dose of rational perspective. Human beings have endured multiple crises during their 300,000 years of existence, and it is in our nature to see our particular problems as the worst of all. Your grandparents worried about nuclear war every bit as much as you do about climate change for instance, your great-grandparents had the Second World War to worry about, and so on. Wind the clock back a thousand years to 1022 and your predecessors in this school were equally convinced that the Biblical Apocalypse was imminent with the coming of the first millennium.

In every single case where humans have faced a threat, they have come together to solve it. History tells us that the problems of the 21st century will not doom us, we will solve them. If you are feeling truly nihilistic about a particular issue, my advice is to do something practical and profound about it – if it's the climate for example, study hard, become an engineer and create something marvellous that produces clean energy, If you're worried about society get involved in politics. Either way you'll do a lot more good than any amount of passive despair.

Secondly – Christian hope. The reading we heard was a letter from the Apostle St Paul, himself a former nihilist. A well-educated Jew obsessed with the fear that the new faith of Christianity spelt disaster for the Jewish people, by his own admission he persecuted the first generation of Christians savagely. Yet, as a result for the famous 'Road to Damascus' moment when he received a direct visitation from God, he replaced fear and hate with love, and not just any love but *Agape* – the most spectacular love of all, a combined love of God and of all mankind fuelling an invincible hope for the future. Hope drawn from *Agape*, Paul teaches us, is indestructible, because it comes directly from a God who loves us. Such hope is permanently renewed within us directly by God like a spring that never dries up. Like God, it is eternal.

Sadly, *Agape* will not save us from hardship or anxiety, both are sewn into the very fabric of our existence as human beings, and there will be times in all our lives when tragic events or the persistence of doom mongers stretches our *Agape* to its limits.

But – whatever the situation, whatever our fears for the future, ultimately all will be well. If we believe in a God who cares for us, inspires us, and stands by us, how could it be otherwise?