

BROKENNESS AND THE YEARNING FOR PARADISE

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PART I: OUR PRESENT CONDITION

David Lodge's novel *Paradise News* captures in comedy a serious analysis of our present condition. It explores the way in which the holiday industry offers us Paradise Now. One character is a researcher, working on the theory that the mere repetition of the paradise motif brainwashes the tourists into thinking they have actually got there. His thesis is that tourism is the new world religion. But Paradise Now always falls short of expectations. The main character is a lapsed priest who tells the story of his life and reflects on Christianity: its role was to give 'supernatural reassurance': 'This has always been the basic appeal of Christianity – and no wonder. The vast majority of human lives in history have not been long, happy and fulfilled. Even if progress should one day achieve Utopia for everyone, which seems unlikely, it cannot compensate retrospectively for the billions of lives already thwarted, stunted and damaged by malnutrition, war, oppression, physical and mental illness. Hence our human longing to believe in an afterlife in which the manifest injustices and inequalities of this life would be redressed ... The Good News is news of eternal life, Paradise news. For my parishioners, I was a kind of travel agent, issuing tickets, insurance, brochures, guaranteeing them ultimate happiness. And looking down at their faces from the altar, as I pronounced these promises and hopes week after week, looking at their patient, trusting, slightly bored faces, and wondering whether they really believed what I was saying or merely hoped it was true, I realised that I didn't, not any longer, not a word of it ...'

The post-Enlightenment account of the human condition has been optimistic and humanistic, promising Paradise Now.¹ The idea that if we could only get the right formula the whole world would be put to rights has come to pervade the popular mind, encouraged by a press that deplores anything going wrong and seeks to apportion blame for every accident. Life, we suppose, is meant to be perfect, and, quite apart from anything else, the demand that puts on the NHS is inevitably crippling. In this context the biggest problem for religious belief has become the issue of evil and suffering. For life obviously is not perfect, and the nature of modernity is disclosed by our anxiety about this. One thing that strikes me as I read Christian writings from past centuries is the lack of concern with the paramount question that dominates so much modern philosophical theology and pastoral experience, namely, how to explain the presence of suffering in nature and human life if we inhabit the creation of a

good God. Earlier generations were concerned with finding the wisdom to face and cope with the hardships of life. Moderns have been offended by them. Given the success of modern medicine in removing much past suffering, modern anxiety about this problem may seem the more ironic. Most people in the West are protected from the sense of life's precariousness with which all previous generations have had to reckon. One hundred years ago people had large families because not all would survive into adulthood. Serious poverty was endemic, hygiene barely understood and health insecure: death happened in the midst of life. Westerners now expect children to be born healthy and to surmount childhood illnesses through vaccination or antibiotics. Death even in old age is sterilised in hospitals. The result is that when things are not perfect, people react with horror. They cry out for better safety precautions and demand the development of miracle cures; the notion of a good creator becomes problematic. Yet in contexts with far greater suffering, such as societies in the non-Western world or belonging to past history, such a response is rarely found. Once there seems to have been more general acceptance of suffering, and indeed death, as a natural part of human life. This contrast between modernity and the past is striking. Why was the atheist response not so powerful in past centuries?

Modernity profoundly changed perspectives on the human condition. Pre-modern ideas were scorned by 'Modern Man', which gloried in the freedom and success brought by the scientific knowledge, technological advances and moral autonomy of post-Enlightenment rationality. Postmodernity has now challenged this self-confidence. With the deterioration of the planet arising from exploitation science and technology are subject to critique. The reaction has allowed pre-modern wisdom to find a new relevance, alongside that of Eastern or African cultures. We now have many contested understandings of the human condition. But we still expect Paradise Now as society becomes more litigious, expecting 'them' to sort everything out and ensure our immunity from the shocks of life.

Against this background, come with me to my holiday Paradise!

Our African guide walks in front through the bush. Suddenly he stops and urges us back. After a bit we turn and ask about the problem. He points to some waving branches: elephant! We'd been dangerously

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NOTES

1. The following paragraphs are adapted from some earlier publications, e.g. my article on 'Suffering', in A Hastings, A Mason and H Pypers (eds.), *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

2. RC Gregg, *Consolation Philosophy. Greek and Christian Paideia in Basil and the Two Gregories (Patristic Monograph Series, No. 3, The Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, 1975)*.

3. Text and English Translation in Loeb edition.

► close. We set out downwind and give it a wide berth. We never saw the beast, until later, back in our camp, we saw an elephant splash across the channel of water. All night the call of the nightjar, the bark of hyena, the sound of roaring lion. Next morning early we walk miles through the bush tracking lion, but the cats are elusive. We find fresh elephant dung, and nervously take a circular route back. And the next 24 hours are the same. We hear hippo grunting and our guide propels the dugout away fast in the other direction. In the distance we see buffalo grazing and avoid the area. We go in search of the leopard we've been hearing, but see nothing but wildebeest and leaping buck, lechwe and impala. It was an amazing experience – camping and walking in the Okavango Delta, one of the last places in Africa where you can still have experiences similar to the old explorers. Our guide had an old spear and a knife, but for safety we were really dependent upon traditional skills – tracking, observation, caution, keeping the fire alight all night. We didn't see much game, but slid through long grassy meadows in the *mokoro* (punt) on a level with frogs and dragonflies, spiders' webs and waterlilies. It was a rich paradise. Yet always the frisson of the wild, the edge of insecurity ... We experienced something of the natural place of the human being in creation, an experience Westerners have long forgotten.

PART II – THE BIBLE AS PASTOR

Our present condition may be addressed not just by reminders like that experience in Botswana, but also by the Bible. However, if the Bible is to be pastor, it is no good if we just reduce it to our own expectations; we have to allow it to speak and challenge us and let the text enlarge our perspectives. Let me remind you of a biblical passage: 'I said in my heart with regard to human beings that God is testing them to show that they are but animals. For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same: as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and humans have no advantage over the animals; for all is vanity. All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again. Who knows whether the human spirit goes upward and the spirit of animals goes downward to the earth?' (Ecc 3.18–22; NRSV)

Why didn't people find the Ecclesiastes passage in the nineteenth century? Because their reading was shaped by prior expectations! To see how people interpreted the Bible in the pre-modern world might enable us to hear what it has to say to our present condition.

I offer one example: Letters of consolation, distilling conventional wisdom in the face of death, were a long-standing genre in the Graeco-Roman world. Christian writings were produced in this genre. They attend to human grief, and provide material for observing how people like Basil of Caesarea responded to the problem of suffering in the fourth century. It has been demonstrated² that these texts are a remarkable blend of the traditional topics found in Graeco-Roman literature, with appeal to biblical texts.

Ten of Basil's letters are consolatory (nos. 5, 28, 29, 62, 101, 206, 269, 300, 301, 302).³ Between them they reveal the following arguments and features, often interwoven in the texts (each discrete point below is a collage of material from the various letters):

- The opening gambit is usually an acknowledgment of the grief and distress of the mourner, the writer often wishing to be present to join in the grieving, to offer consolation or to honour of the dead.
- A picture is painted of the lost person – thanksgiving for their life is the best response.
- Grief should not be indulged, but kept in bounds through God's gift of reason – setting an example to others is important, as well as preparing for God's judgement of one's own behaviour.
- Trust in Christ means hope in the resurrection.
- Tribulations lead to perfection – endurance leads to crowns of glory – there are rewards for patience.
- Understanding what God ordains may elude us, but it must be accepted, with thanksgiving and patience, for God is wise, loves us and knows best – he watches over us, and everything is disposed by God's goodness – the person lived their allotted time.
- All are dust and return to the dust – it happens to all human beings, including Adam, Abel, Noah, Abraham and Moses – one born of a mortal is mortal – we are not the first to experience loss and grief – creation itself will pass away.
- The lost person has escaped potential sin and suffering.
- Afflictions are never in vain – they are a test of genuine love for God.
- Job provides an instructive example.
- God lent the person to us and has now reclaimed them.

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- Their life is not destroyed but transformed for the better – true life begins when the soul is released from these bodily bonds.
- Heaven has received them, and we will join the person there in due course – all are on a journey and go to the same goal.

So the Bible confirmed some ancient commonplaces, but also provided a different perspective and various examples. What is noticeable is this interplay between the Bible and the outlook of the time – the culture accepted that suffering and change were part and parcel of life, debating whether it was due to chance or fate. Physical existence meant being vulnerable and limited – the whole point was to rise above this, to treat life as a schooling of the soul. The Bible partly confirmed this, and partly brought it under the bigger perspective of being God's creatures and being accountable to the Creator, while offering reasons for hope and confidence, for living life triumphantly. The Bible read with Basil could provide a way of challenging the whole idea of Paradise Now – indeed suggests, paradoxically, that the deepest truths and values are found in 'brokenness': 'The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise' (Ps 51.17).

In conclusion I offer the outlines of a modern parallel to the patristic example (my own exposition of 2 Cor 4.7): 'We have this treasure in earthen vessels.'

Clay pots were used for all kinds of storage in the ancient world. They were part of everyday life, not just for things like grain and oil but for precious things like books – the Nag Hammadi codices were found in earthenware jars. There's an implied contrast with gold or silver containers, but that just reinforces the everyday ordinariness at the heart of the metaphor. Treasure is secreted in ordinariness.

It was a commonplace in the ancient world to think of the body as a container of the mind or soul; in Genesis 2, God took dust, turned it into clay, moulded something like the clay figurines found by archaeologists all over the Middle East, then breathed life into it. Paul's reference in the previous verse to God's creative word, 'Let light shine out of darkness' reinforces the cross-reference to the creation narrative. The treasure, then, is life and light. Clay pots are expendable – cheap they may be, but they are also easily shattered, and not then repairable; bodies, too, are fragile and vulnerable. But the treasure, the life of God, is exposed in the process. Paul emphasises the

incongruity and the paradox – the vehicle containing the all-surpassing treasure is of no enduring value. This may both obscure and reveal the extraordinary value of the contents.

Now let's read this scriptural metaphor in the light of the L'Arche communities, where people commit themselves to living in community with people with learning disabilities. In a world where competence and success is highly valued, where the triumph of science has fostered the perception that all ills can be overcome, death endlessly postponed and suffering alleviated, where the cult of sport has exposed perfect bodies and encouraged their nurture through physical discipline, where there's been a reaction against bodily inhibitions and sexual repression, L'Arche has perceived beauty in damaged bodies, treasure in vulnerable and fragile persons. In the everydayness of attending to bodily functions, feeding and defecating, washing and dressing, the sanctity of bodies has been acknowledged, but in a context in which their transformation is not through miracles, but through the recognition of God's love and power in mutual need. It's not simply that the strong help the weak – rather the weak reveal our common essential vulnerability as human creatures. It's no accident that washing one another's feet has been developed as a paraliturgy in the L'Arche communities, for here in community bodily dependence on one another is sanctified. In the ordinary everyday business of living together, the divine image is discerned, secreted in the ordinariness of clay pots that are breakable, but in their brokenness expose the treasure within.

Like the Corinthians, we find it difficult to discern power in weakness, treasure in clay pots. We look for the signs of success not defeat. But what we get is a crucified Christ, and an apostle whose catalogue of hardships belies any idea that God is with him. Maybe the sign we need to appreciate the light of the knowledge of God's glory in the face of Jesus Christ is the experience of the L'Arche communities.

I'm prepared to be agnostic about the form of our eschatological life – for it must transcend anything we can now comprehend. But I will affirm confidence in God and in the sacredness of bodies. For it is in the sometimes dirty, always ordinary reality of our natural creaturely existence that transcendence is glimpsed and ultimate reality discerned. Note the profoundly biblical dimension of this agnosticism – it implies resurrection of the body, however hard that is to conceive! It also challenges the notion of Paradise NOW! ■