

### Hope for your pessimism

Becky was known for her optimism. Sadie was out shopping when she bumped into Becky. Becky was looking after her two grandchildren whilst their mother did some shopping on her own.

Sadie said, "Oh Becky, what beautiful children, how old are they?"

"Well," Becky said, "The lawyer is 6 months and the doctor is 2 years old."

"May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in Thy sight O Lord our strength and our Redeemer."

St. Paul said: "Out of his infinite glory may God give you the power through His spirit for your hidden self to grow strong, so that Christ may live in your hearts through faith, and then, planted in love and built on love, you will ... have strength to grasp the breadth and the length, the height and the depth, until knowing the love of Christ, which is beyond all knowledge, you are filled with the utter fullness of God.

(Ephesians 3:16.)

In a landmark book, psychologist Martin Seligman took the world of Psychology by storm. He said that optimism could actually be learned. Seligman claims and has proved statistically that:

- 1) The way we think, especially about health, **changes** our health
- 2) Optimists catch fewer infections and diseases than negative pessimists
- 3) Optimists have better health habits than pessimists
- 4) Our immune systems work better when we are optimistic
- 5) Evidence suggests that optimists live longer than pessimists

Seligman argues that our religion affects our optimism index as well. Good news for churches: Regular church goers will get less depressed than occasional church goers. According to the research done by Templeton of Templeton financial fame, the longest-lived professional group of all, are ministers and Presbyterian ministers top that list.

The other side of the coin is also proved by the stats, that pessimism

- 1) promotes depression
- 2) Pessimism produces inertia rather than activity in the face of setbacks.
- 3) Pessimists feel bad: blue, down, worried and anxious
- 4) Pessimism is self fulfilling- pessimists don't persist in the face of challenges and therefore fail more frequently, even when success is attainable
- 5) Pessimism is associated with poor physical health
- 6) Pessimists are usually defeated when they try for high political office
- 7) Even when pessimists are right and things turn out badly, they still feel worse. Setbacks to them become disasters, disasters turn into catastrophes and on it goes...

Very importantly, Seligman argues that pessimism and optimism are **learned** behaviours. Here is the hope, if you are feeling pessimistic: you can always change. If we listen to Seligman and his research and act on his findings our lives can change for the better! And if we combine that research with the wisdom of St. Paul, we can transform our lives!

I know many of you are close to despair about the world; There is war in Palestine and Israel with horrific casualties. Ukraine has been battered by Putin's violation of international law with thousands of Russian and Ukrainian dead. Hurricanes have devastated the American South and forest fires blaze in an overheated West. It is hard, isn't it, to be optimistic?

Let's understand something about Optimism and pessimism.

Both pessimism and optimism are **thought constructs**. They are also part of the spiritual quest for meaning in our lives. So, I have a question for us today. Why, if pessimism is so destructive of creativity and

human life and our inner resources, why ever did God put pessimism into the mix in our world? Does pessimism have a function?

According to Seligman pessimism has one virtue: pessimism helps us to appreciate external realities more accurately. Suppose that an airline pilot is in a critical situation- a thunderstorm, ice on the wings, little fuel left and one engine down? Pessimism will give an extremely accurate view of the chances for survival. It hedges its bets. It breeds caution. It can put forward correctives.

Testing shows that pessimists are far better at interpreting external reality accurately. When it comes to money, optimists are accurate about their wins but tend to minimize their losses.

In the New Testament the archetypal pessimist has got to be doubting Thomas. Thomas says he won't believe until he can put his fingers into the nail prints in Jesus hands and puts his hand into the wound in Jesus side- then and then only will he believe!

**So, St. John, thinking positively, cites Thomas as a sure proof of the resurrection because when a pessimist is converted to belief there has to be credibility. It's powerful!**

So, the strength of pessimists can sometimes be good and more accurate on external realities, in things like calculating financial risk, or physical danger, *but critical pessimistic judgements do not carry over well into internal realities.*

***For instance:***

In relationships such as love affairs, marriages, or friendships, **optimists do so much better!** Why because the pessimist turns molehills into mountains! Pessimists drag the moods of people down around them. In meetings they can be a real drag, because they think they are being realistic. **But Pessimists get depressed and it is their general depression that often is speaking.** When their mood goes down things

get out of all proportion. We know that the higher the mood in our relationships, the greater the intimacy, the better the perspective. That is why it is never good to argue with anyone when you are down. It won't solve a thing! It will make the situation worse...

Do you have a problem with your spouse or a good friend? Wait until you are both in a good mood, then work on it. If either person's mood begins to go down, stop! You are going the wrong way!

If the mood gets better, you know that you are going the right way. That is how you will know, especially if you have prayed about it. God never leads into depression or feeling down. Instead, God heals us and lifts us out of it.

So let me summarize: The sole virtue of pessimism is in dealing with an accurate assessment of external realities. **When dealing with internal realities such as moods or relationships, it's a miserable failure.**

On which side is the historical Jesus? Was he a pessimist? Did he endorse the skepticism that came from Thomas?

This is what he said: "Happy are those who have not seen and yet believe."

Pessimist have to see before believing. Jesus said "Don't go there!"

Why?

***Because pessimism can cripple your life.*** Do we really want ill health, ulcers, a greater chance of getting cancer? Do we want to fail? Do we really want to alienate people by being critical all the time? Do we want to be stuck with addictions? If so, then we need to choose pessimism as a way of life. Some folks I know of have done this, thinking they are being realistic! But understand, pessimism will slowly destroy us!

On the other hand, do we want abundant health, a strong immune system, a greater rate of success, plenty of friends? Do we want to have

the power to defeat addictions? Do we want a long and happy life? Then we can choose optimism as a lifestyle.

Optimism sees life as good. Remember the story of creation in Genesis which said that when God created the world, God saw that it was good?

Faith, which is considered necessary to please God, is hopeful. It is not gloomy. Faith leads us towards God. Cynicism does not. Cynicism in its ultimate form argues that there is no God. There is no purpose to this universe. So why bother about anything? Why not just lie down and die? As Job said: “May the day perish when I was born and the night that told of a boy conceived.” Such is the corrosive power of pessimism...

So why is pessimism in the mix of life at all? What might God have had in mind to put pessimism into the mix?

Seligman writes:

“By understanding the single virtue of pessimism along with its pervasive crippling consequences, we can learn to resist pessimism’s constant callings even if they are deep seated brain habits. We can learn to choose optimism for the most part, but also to heed pessimism when it is warranted.”

So it is a matter of balance with the weight given to optimism if we want to be happy!

Now to the mighty secret of St Paul with which we began this morning. ***Out of God’s infinite glory may He give you the power through His spirit for your hidden self to grow strong so that Christ may live in your hearts through faith, and then, planted in love and built on love, you will with all the saints have strength to grasp the breadth and the length, the height and the depth, until knowing the love of Christ, which is beyond all knowledge, you are filled with the utter fullness of God.***

When do we listen to optimism and when **must** we listen to pessimism? St. Paul does not leave us without an answer. We need to listen he says to an inner voice within us. This is the hidden self to which he refers. He talks about this inner self growing stronger until we are filled with the fulness of God. Why does this happen?

Because Paul teaches us that Christ can live **within us through faith** and then we can be planted in love and built on love. Then we will be able to grasp the breadth of love which goes beyond knowledge until we are filled with the fullness of God.

One of the greatest attributes of God's fulness is **wisdom**.

If you have decided to give your life to God, to love God with all your heart, your mind and your strength. If you have decided to ask the historical Jesus to live within you, then you will have access to the mind of God and a heart that is infinite. That is the promise that the pessimist knows nothing about.

All of us can be wise. It is not a matter of intelligence or ability. There are extremely simple folk who are wise. As Scripture says: "Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings wisdom comes."

What Seligman has found is this: When it is necessary for us to choose between pessimism and optimistic faith, **wisdom** will help us to make that good choice!

There is a time to pull back when the risks are too great. But there is also a time to dream. Without dreams there would be no Taj Mahal and no conquering of Everest. There would be no four-minute mile. There would be no Knox in Stratford,

After the devastating fire of Knox Stratford in 1913, Knox's brilliant and gifted minister said:" We are a sad lot of men, but not hopeless; and we face the question of rebuilding with fortitude." The strength of those

men who were sad but not hopeless is all around us in this magnificent building that opened in 1915.

Anything wonderful, anything great begins with a vision and sometimes that vision is powerful enough to defy reality. That is how we got a man on the moon. It wasn't possible until we visioned it and started to work on the how.

**Jesus risked everything to try to bring the human race back to God.** His choice to die was a choice based on optimism, based on his belief echoed by St. Paul "that all things work together for good to those who love God and are called to that great purpose."

When God acted in history, to raise Jesus from the dead, there was a message: There is life after life, there is hope in the face of despair.

If pessimism had been allowed to win, then there would be at the center of the universe an ultimate NO! But because of the resurrection and the purpose of God that life would go on after death, there is an ultimate YES at the heart of the universe. Finally, it will be all good!

That ultimate Yes that sits in the center of things, puts a bridle on greed, on suffering and the evil of human beings in Palestine and Ukraine. Wait for it. As Scripture says: **Be not deceived God is not mocked**  
**Whatsoever a man sows that shall he also reap.**

What does St. Paul mean when he talks about being filled with the utter fullness of God? It's the deep knowledge of how to respond to life with kindness with its ups and downs, its challenges and its joys, **in the same way that God does:** with creativity, with resilience, with hope, with Love and unstoppable optimism in the future and what it will bring. Without diminishing our own selfhood in any way, we can become full of God!

One morning a man stopped at a flower shop to order some flowers. He was going to wire the flowers to his mother, rather than travel there

and give them in person. His mother lived 200 miles away. As he got out of his car, he noticed a young girl sitting on the curb outside the flower shop, crying. He asked her what was wrong and she replied, "I wanted to buy a red rose for my mother. But I only have seventy-five cents, and a rose costs two dollars." The man smiled and said, "Well, come on in with me. I'll buy you a rose."

He bought the little girl her rose and ordered his own mother's flowers to be wired. As they were leaving, he asked the little girl if she needed a ride home? She said, "Oh yes, please! You can take me to my mother." She directed him to a cemetery, where she placed the rose on a freshly dug grave. The man took her home and then returned to the flower shop, canceled the wire order, picked up a beautiful bouquet **and drove the two hundred miles to his mother's home!**

Faith, Hope, unconditional love and optimistic kindness, **can all be learned! How exciting is that?**

Thanks be to God!