

Sermon Imagination, Faith, Inspiration, Hope 27.10.13
Joel 2:23-32 Luke 17:5-6 Julian Templeton

Imagination is a powerful force of the mind. When the mind imagines something it gives it existence in thought. Many things begin as an act of imagination based on the experience of the thinker. Then with huge effort and dedication they are created or recognised and go on to make a profound difference:

- Michaelangelo's decoration of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel
- the Forth Rail Bridge
- Penicillin
- borders between nation states
- the Higgs Boson
- the Community of Camden Churches Cold Weather Shelter

None of these existed or had been discovered until their creators, by an initial act of imagination, faith, and inspiration brought them into being.

The mention of faith brings us to Jesus's response to the disciples' request for more of it. Jesus effectively says: 'You have misunderstood the nature of faith. Far more important than how much faith you have is what or who your faith is in. If you really believe that God can do anything, then you can achieve what others regard as impossible.'

The mention of inspiration brings us to our second reading from the prophecy of Joel.

'I will pour out my spirit' says the Lord;
your sons and daughters will prophesy,
the old shall dream dreams,

the young shall see visions.
Even on the least will I pour out my spirit.

Joel 2:28-29

In much of the Old Testament, the expectation about the action of God's spirit is that God would occasionally empower an individual for a specific task: for example, God's spirit comes upon King Saul and the Prophet Elijah on particular occasions. What is so revolutionary about Joel's prophecy is that he envisions the whole people of God receiving inspiration. And the effect of this inspiration will be a daring audacity to hope that with God's help the future can be different from the past and the present:

- sons and daughters will be inspired to proclaim a God-shaped future
- the old will dream of hitherto undreamt-of realities
- the young will envision a better way of life
- and even the least, those at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder, the poor and the enslaved, will be inspired to hope for change and improvement.

What makes it difficult to hear the good news of the power of inspiration in this text today is that the news media continually bombards us with bad news. There is no shortage of bad news stories to feed the insatiable human appetite for tragedy and disaster. These bad news stories can blind us to the very many wonderful and good things that are happening in our world. All of these good and life-giving things began as an act of imagination and inspiration, and have been enacted by people with faith and determination. Here are some statistics from the Copenhagen Consensus Centre¹:

¹ <http://www.copenhagenconsensus.com> as reported in *The Times*, "What an increasingly wonderful world" by Bjorn Lomborg, 19.10.13,

- Due to improvements in health, nutrition, and sanitation, the average human life expectancy has risen from 32 years in 1900 to 69 years today
- Due to improvements in income and education, the rate of literacy has risen from 30% in 1900 to 80% today

These improvements are due to many, many people who, by faith and determination, have had a dream or vision that they could make a difference to the lives of others, and have done something about it.

Martin Luther King was one who dared to dream. In the speech he made from the Lincoln Memorial, Washington DC in 1963, encouraged by Mahalia Jackson, he put aside his prepared text and shared his dream:

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

And he later quotes from the prophet Isaiah:

I have a dream that one day 'every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.' (40:4-5)

And then he speaks of the relationship between faith and hope:

This is the faith that I go back to the South with. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.

“With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope.” King’s speech inspired many then, and still inspires many today, not to despair but to hope. King believed that the injustice of racial segregation in the USA would eventually be redressed because God would inspire more and more people to resist it, and this would eventually become an unstoppable tide. And so it proved to be.

When we think about the problems and challenges we face today, they can seem like a huge mountain causing us to despair. But what Joel and Jesus and Martin Luther King would say is what seems to us a mountain is to God a molehill. If we would put our faith in God and let God’s Spirit inspire us to dream and to envision, then those problems and challenges that seem so insurmountable may prove not to be so.

Alexander Fleming could have dismissed the mould in his petrie dish as having no possible application to the problem of infection; but he did not. He and others were inspired to develop antibiotics.

Peter Higgs could have kept to himself his theory about a boson that gives particles mass in 1964; but he did not. And in March this year the CERN experiments confirmed his theory,

and recently he and Francois Englert were awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics.

10 years ago, a group of churches in Camden could have concluded that the growing problem of homelessness was something that they could do nothing to help; but they did not. This year will be the 10th year that churches in Camden, including more recently this Church, have opened up their buildings and supplied volunteers to provide temporary hospitality and accommodation for the homeless over the winter months. The C4WS scheme has an impressive rate of finding permanent accommodation for the homeless (see C4WS Annual Reports).

Let us not forget that it was someone at our own Church Meeting who expressed concern that most children did not know bible stories anymore that led to the establishment of *Pathway*, a Christian Education Charity that today has contact with thousands of children in schools across North London.

When people are inspired to imagine that things could be different, and when they have faith and hope that they can make a difference—and when they don't give up when at first they fail or meet opposition—then existing reality yields to new reality. Stones of hope are hewn from mountains of despair. Mulberry trees are uprooted and planted in the sea.

I think what often prevents us from imagining and believing and hoping and working for change is that we think that our limited energies and abilities can't possibly make any difference to problems and challenges. But Joel's prophecy, if it is about anything, is about the democratisation of inspiration. It is about sons and daughters, young and old, and the least, being inspired to dream and envision and hope. In other words,

when it is not just one or two people who are inspired, but many people who are inspired, then their combined dreams, visions and efforts can effect substantial and long-lasting change.

I want to end by asking a question for you to think about:

If you could change one thing, what would it be, and why?

Let us take about 5 minutes to think about this, and if you wish to discuss your thoughts with the person sitting next to you, feel free to do so.