

THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES¹

A sermon preached by Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, 17 August 2025

On 20 February 2008, Rowan Williams, then Archbishop of Canterbury, gave an address to a conference held in Great St Mary's Church, Cambridge. The conference was entitled "A World to Believe in—Cambridge Consultations on Faith, Humanity and the Future". In his address, he said:

... the trouble with bad religion, what makes it terrible, is that it's a way of teaching you to ignore what is real.

Now, I'm going to suggest this evening that one of the tests of actual faith, as opposed to bad religion, is whether it stops you ignoring things. Faith is most fully itself and most fully life-giving when it stops you ignoring things, when it opens your eyes and uncovers for you a world larger than you thought—and of course therefore a bit more alarming than you ever thought. One difference that faith makes is what more it lets you see, and how successfully it stops you denying, resisting, ignoring aspects of what's real.²

When I read this address. I was reminded of Rowland Crowcher's comment on bad religion:

The trouble with some Christian testimonies is that they leave too many questions answered.³

Williams used the long discussion in Chapter 9 of St John's gospel about the healing of the man born blind as his principal biblical reference. That discussion is about pretended sight and effective blindness. He could easily have used this morning's gospel from St Luke, which is about pretended knowledge and actual ignorance.

Taken overall, however, this morning's gospel is far from straightforward. It begins with a surprising announcement about bringing fire and division to the earth, rather than peace. Mathew's version of this passage refers to a sword rather than fire, but the meaning is the same.⁴ Quoting Micah 7:6, Jesus describes coming conflict within families. This is about what happens when change comes. Not everyone accepts it. Some just try to ignore it. Others actively resist. Given that Jesus quotes from Micah, his hearers would have been familiar with the original context, which is not particularly about families, but uses them as a reference to the nation, the whole society.⁵

Of course, Jesus is talking about the change that he brings, but change can happen in many directions. This is why reading the signs of the times is so important. Jesus then makes a somewhat sarcastic analogy between reading the weather and understanding the signs of the times. This is the pretence of knowledge and the actual ignorance that I mentioned earlier.

¹ Readings: Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80:1-2, 8-19; Hebrews 11:29-12:2; Luke 12:49-59

² ['What Difference Does it Make?' - The Gospel in Contemporary...](#)

³ Rowland Crowcher (ed), *Rivers in the Desert*, Sutherland, Albatross Books, 1991, p. 136.

⁴ Matthew 10:34-36

⁵ See Andrew McGowan, *Fire on Earth*, [Fire on Earth - by Andrew McGowan - Andrew's Version](#)

Next, Jesus puts his challenge in the form of advice about what to do if you are taken to the debtor's court. That advice is to settle the action as fast as possible. This is a practical view of facing a worldly problem and reading it properly.

We will understand this if we know what went before today's gospel. Jesus has said,

But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.⁶

He then expands his comment by telling them a parable about two kinds of managers who were put in charge of their master's estate. One is prudent and careful in his duties. The other, deceived because the master delays returning from his journey, behaves badly. Then the master returns with the expected consequences for the different managers.⁷ It is then that Jesus speaks about bringing fire to the earth.

It can be no surprise then that his arrival will cause division, even within families. Some will have understood, others will not have. When Jesus identifies the religious authorities as those who did not understand, the expected fire is set in motion. The first person to burn, to suffer the lack of peace, is Jesus himself. This is why he speaks of the baptism that he is about to complete and wishes that it will come quickly.

Nowhere in this reading does Jesus suggest that reading the signs is an easy task. His criticism is that some pretend to knowledge that they do not have. It is not that they missed something staring them in the face. It is that they were not open to something new. That is one of the reasons that the coming of Jesus brings fire.

I have wondered about reading the signs of these times. We know that every sort of catastrophe brings out those who think that we have arrived at the end of time, at the Apocalypse. After more than 2,000 years, you might have thought that we had learnt that lesson. But, in Crowcher's words, this is a matter of leaving too many questions answered.

I have been impressed by the wisdom of the Jesuit priest, David Neuhaus⁸ He was born in South Africa in 1962, the son of Jewish parents who fled Germany in 1936. When he was 15, his parents sent him to Israel to escape the turmoil of apartheid. There he was quasi-adopted by a Muslim Palestinian family. Through the ministry of an Orthodox nun, he was converted to Christianity and, in 2000, ordained a priest in the Society of Jesus. He is a leading scripture scholar. Neuhaus is a regular contributor to the English Catholic weekly, *The Tablet*, commenting on affairs in Israel and Palestine. Having inhabited three religious worlds, he is well qualified to speak.

In the issue for 31 May 2025, he commented on the situation in Gaza. In an article called, "What is 'hope' right now?",⁹ he can see none; there is no foreseeable way out of the death and destruction. He cannot understand why God allows such evil to continue. He rages against God, recalling how Abraham argued with God against the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, how

⁶ Luke 12:39-40

⁷ Luke 12:41-48

⁸ [David Neuhaus - Wikipedia](#) and [‘This is one of the most emotionally charged times I have known’ - Anglican Journal](#)

⁹ David Neuhaus, hat is 'hope' right now?". *The Tablet*, 31 May 2025, pp.10-11

the prophets cried out against God's apparent silence and how Jesus cried from the cross against being abandoned.¹⁰

Neuhaus rejects hope as a form of denial, recalling Karl Marx's criticism of religion as "opium". Neither does he follow Freud in regarding hope as a neurotic illusion, or Kafka in denying the possibility of meaning. He does not fall into Crowcher's trap of leaving too many questions answered.

Neuhaus identifies two kinds of hope. There is, he says, hope that is *future oriented*. Today, he sees such hope as a phantom. It may be there, but he cannot find it. As an alternative, he identifies *past oriented* hope. He looks back to Nazi Germany and apartheid South Africa. Once apparently secure, and relentlessly evil, those regimes have now gone. Jesus hung on the cross in agony, but Easter Day came.

What Neuhaus relies on is the knowledge of God's enduring love. He says,

This hope is born of the conviction that God desires good for humanity. This hope finds its roots in an experience of God's life-giving love. ... It is this hope that does not ask the question: what will happen to me if I see what is happening? What will happen to me if I speak out? Rather, it is this hope that prompts the question: what will happen ... if I do not speak out?

Looking again at this morning's gospel, I noted the criticism that Jesus made of those who could read the weather and not the signs of the times. We do not read the weather because we have the gift of seeing the future. We read the weather because of our experience of its patterns. In the same way, we read the signs of the times by understanding our experience of God's love. We build on what we know.

... one of the tests of actual faith, as opposed to bad religion, is whether it stops you ignoring things.

¹⁰ Genesis 18:25; Habakkuk 1:2; Mark 15:34

Eastertide reflection – what is ‘hope’ right now?

[David Neuhaus](#)

29 May 2025, The Tablet



Relatives of seven Palestinians killed by an Israeli airstrike on Sabra in Gaza City last week (ALAmy/Imago, Omar Ashtawy)

In the face of death, cruelty and suffering in Gaza, a Catholic priest, the son of Jewish parents who fled Nazi Germany and found refuge in South Africa, searches for a hope rooted in the memory of past breakthroughs

The Israeli army continued its bombardment of Khan Younis last Saturday. In the bombing, Alaa al-Najjar, who was at work, lost nine of her 10 children: Sidar, Luqman, Sadin, Riwal, Ruslan, Jubran, Hawa, Rakan and Yahya. Her only surviving son, Adam, and her husband Hamdi, were critically wounded. I share these words with you under their gaze.

There is no light at the end of the tunnel right now in Palestine/Israel. The lights have gone out one by one. Zephaniah’s words ring out, “Ah, soiled, defiled, oppressing city! It has listened to no voice; it has accepted no correction” (Zephaniah 3:1). Our governments are made up predominantly of heartless leaders, who seem to have no conscience. And we continue to descend into the darkness of an age in which there is no hope, no mercy, no empathy, no compassion. When I try to push away this sense of despair, I feel I am betraying those who are mourning their dead, the wounded, those trapped as hostages and prisoners, the displaced and homeless, the hungry and thirsty, those dying slowly because there are no medicines, those locked into a reality in which the horizon of hope has been shut off, replaced with a solid wall that explicitly proclaims that there is no exit.

What is hope in my life as a Christian? I am well aware of what hope is not. It must not be an opium; Marx clairvoyantly defrocked hope as part of religion understood as a drug that anaesthetises burning desire for change. Hope must not be a neurotic illusion; Freud prophetically revealed the immature or psychologically unhealthy nature of hope that turns its back on the world, replacing it with a projection of an imaginative desire. It must not be an absurdity; Kafka has forced us to look at a world in which the hope of finding meaning is often an escape from the inevitability of senselessness.

Mature hope cannot be a flight from the harshness of reality. As a Christian, I must face the tragedy of our present times and the hopelessness it generates. If I am to be in solidarity with those who are on the front lines, I cannot mouth nice pieties. I must not turn away from death and suffering, burying my head in the sand like an ostrich. I must allow myself to be exposed, raw and hurting.

For reasons I cannot understand, God allows evil to have its day. I rebel and revolt against this, even against God Almighty who allows it. This rebellion is an integral part of the life of faith. Abraham cried out against God, who revealed to him the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. "Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked!" (Genesis 18:25). Habakkuk railed against God, who seemed deaf to his cries, "O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?" (Habakkuk 1:2). Jesus too, on the Cross, cried out this sense of abandonment that echoes throughout history, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34). At the ninth hour, hope has evaporated. The cry against God is part of the word of God. A certain kind of hope must die in contemplating the reality of violence, war and death.

There are two kinds of hope. There is a hope that is future oriented. It hopes for certain things that seem to appear faintly on a horizon. It roots itself in a vision that provides an alternative to the reality in which we find ourselves. Equality. Justice. Peace. Security. Prosperity. All these hopes are legitimate, when the horizon is not completely blocked off by walls that make exit from the present impossible. Our present is a wasteland left over from waves of unceasing hatred, unrelenting vengeance and brutal violence. When I look around in Palestine/Israel today and cry out to God, all those things that I might indeed have hoped for, now seem like phantoms; appearing briefly and then evaporating, shattered on the hard, merciless rocks of reality. Revenge. Hatred. Victory. Violence. Ethnocentricity. These rocks constitute our reality.

However, there is another sort of hope that struggles for breath inside me. A hope that is past oriented – a hope rooted in the memory of past breakthroughs. My Jewish parents fled Nazi Germany at a time when there was no hope and an empire of death held absolute sway. Those relatives who did not flee were murdered. My parents found refuge in South Africa where a racist regime erected a system of apartheid that privileged Whites over Blacks. It ground on for decades. Black people were sentenced to life in the margins, to pauperisation, brutal repression and hopelessness. Anyone who resisted was forcibly silenced. During those long years of death, hoping for something different from what was reality, mostly constituted wishful thinking, an avoidance of reality. Opium. Illusion. Absurdity. The privileged had the luxury of hoping, while the poor mostly experienced abandonment.

And yet, Nazi Germany and apartheid South Africa are memories of the past. This is a consolation in times of present darkness and gives birth to an occasional glimmer of hope in Palestine/Israel today. Memory of the past is an integral part of my life of faith. As a Christian I am called constantly to remember the Cross on which hung a man crucified. He died an excruciating death, painful and slowly suffocating.

As I gaze on him, I am forced to contemplate my own complicity in the structures of evil that had him condemned to death. There is no easy escape from that place. I must stand before the Cross on Good Friday and at the tomb in which he was laid on Holy Saturday. However, Easter Sunday does come. It is then I can remember that the tomb in which he was placed is empty. The God I believe in does not allow death, darkness and evil to have the final word. Sometimes God takes a long time. An exasperated Habakkuk heard the words “If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay” (Habakkuk 2:3). I do not understand the words “it will not delay”. All I sense is that interminable delay.

I am raging against God. In our present, there is no open horizon. Before us is more death, threats of even more destruction, ethnic cleansing and suffering. There is nothing I can hope for – equality, justice or peace – that does not seem like a total illusion within a reality where revenge, killing and cruelty are omnipresent. And yet ... hope is a part of who I am as a Christian. I stand before an empty tomb that contained the corpse of a man who had been tortured and crucified. His mangled body had been wrapped and placed in the tomb. But now he is not there. The tomb is astonishingly empty. The faith born before that empty tomb that he is risen is a part of whom I am. If I did not believe that the tomb is empty, I would not be a Christian. It is out of this conviction that a different kind of hope emerges.

This hope does not look toward an illusory horizon. This hope looks back, remembering that God has been good. This hope is born of the conviction that God desires good for humanity. This hope finds its roots in an experience of God’s life-giving love. It is out of this hope that I can continue to speak and act. It is this hope that will not allow me to give up, not on God and not on humanity. It is this hope that means I cannot walk past the dead, the wounded, the displaced, the hungry, I cannot look away from Gaza City, Khan Younis and Rafah, Jenin, Tulkarm and Nablus, I cannot forget those still hostages from all over Israel, those dead and mourning there too.

It is this hope that does not ask the question: what will happen to me if I see what is happening? What will happen to me if I speak out? Rather, it is this hope that prompts the question: what will happen to the people of Palestine/Israel if I do not see, if I do not speak out?

Hope is rooted in the experience of a God who loves us, and of a community that this hope engenders. Hope motivates me to know what is happening in Palestine/Israel and not look away. It pushes me to put faces, names and narratives to those who have died and are dying as we speak and not ignore them. Hope drives me to seek out others who are desperately trying to bring all this to an end, determined to do something together. Hope is the life force that seeks to make me and you witnesses to a humanity that is being extinguished in a world that turns away from those falling by the side of the road. Hope resources resilience that pushes on despite everything. My prayer is that this hope resists the growing despair.

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