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The Hope For Europe (HFE) Working Group

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THE TRANSFORMING POWER OF JESUS CHRIST

By Dr John Stott

Jesus Christ offers hope to Europe and the rest of the world precisely because he offers power to change the status quo. Hope and power belong together. Other options are failing us. Modernity, the child of the European Renaissance and Enlightenment, with its ingenuous confidence in the autonomy of reason, the omnipotence of science and the inevitability of progress, has been largely discredited. Post-modernity in reaction rejects the very concept of objective truth together with all so-called meta-narratives which offer universal solutions. As an alternative to these, both to the self-confidence of modernity and to the scepticism of post-modernity, the Gospel of Jesus Christ brings us a realistic hope.

But what is it about the human condition which prompts us to talk about hope and our need for power? What is our human dilemma? In order to answer this I need to resort to a paradox.

I. Diagnosis: The paradox of our humanness

Analysis must precede solution. Diagnosis must precede cure. The Christian critique of much modern philosophy is that it is either too naive in its optimism, or too negative in its pessimism about the human condition.

Secular humanists tend to be extremely optimistic about the human condition. True, they regard human beings as nothing but the product of blind evolutionary forces but they have boundless confidence in our future evolutionary potential. So that one day they believe we will be able to take hold of our own history and control our own destiny. But this is too optimistic! It doesn't take into account of what Christians all down the ages have called Original Sin, that twist of self-centredness which has again and again thwarted the dreams of social reformers whether in Europe or in other parts of the world.

Atheistic existentialists, on the other hand, go to the opposite extreme of pessimism and even of despair. Because there is no God, they say, there are no values any longer; and although somehow we must find the courage to be, nothing has meaning. Everything is ultimately absurd, which is at least logical if God is dead. Mark Twain, the well-known American wit, once said that if man could be crossed with a cat it would improve man but deteriorate the cat! But that is too pessimistic! It takes no account of the love, the joy, the heroism and the self-sacrifice which have adorned the human story.

So it is my contention that Christianity avoids both those extremes of optimism and pessimism. What we need is neither the easy optimism of the humanist, nor the dark pessimism of the cynic, but the radical realism of the Bible. The Bible presents the paradox of our humanness: on the one hand the glory and on the other the shame of being a human being; on the one hand the dignity, and on the other, the depravity of our humanness.

1. The glory or dignity of human beings

In the very first chapter of the Bible we read the majestic words of our Creator: Let us make man in our image and likeness. So God created man in his own image, male and female he created them. There has been some debate among theologians as to what is meant by the divine image in human beings. Perhaps the best explanation is that it consists of a cluster of qualities or capacities, which distinguish humans from animals. There are at least five we can mention:

a. Our capacity for rational thought and self-consciousness: Animals also have brains, some more rudimentary than others, but humans can think, reason, argue and debate. We are also self-conscious. We have an extraordinary ability to step outside ourselves and evaluate ourselves. We are restlessly inquisitive about the universe.

b. Our capacity for moral choices: We have a certain conscious to discern between right and wrong and a certain freedom to choose between right and wrong. We are aware of a moral order that is above and beyond us to which we are accountable, and from which we cannot escape. We have an inner urge to do what we believe to be right and a sense of guilt when we do what we believe to be wrong.

c. Our capacity for artistic creativity: When God created us in his own image and likeness, he made us creative, like himself. So we draw and we paint. We build and we sculpt. We dream and we dance. We write poetry and we make music. We appreciate what is beautiful to the eye and to the ear and to the touch.

d. Our capacity for social relationships: All animals mate, reproduce and care for their young. Some are gregarious by nature while others develop complex social structures. But humans are different. We hunger for the authentic relationships of love. We know that love is not merely a disturbance in our endocrine glands. No, love is the greatest thing in the world. Living is loving. And without love our personality disintegrates and dies. But why is love the greatest thing in the world? Because God is love. When God who is love made us in his own image and likeness, he gave us a capacity to love and to be loved.

e. Our capacity for spiritual worship: The collapse of Marxism was due to Marxism's unrelenting materialism. This can never satisfy the human spirit, either in its capitalistic or communistic guise. As the great Dostoyevsky said, 'Man must bow down before the infinitely great.' Or as Theodore Rozaak has written, 'Without transcendence, the person shrivels.' Indeed I venture to say that we are at our most human when we are worshipping God.

Here then are five human capacities: the capacity to think, to choose, to create, to love and to worship. They set us apart from the animal creation, and together they constitute the image of God.

No wonder poets have celebrated the unique dignity and glory of human beings! Shakespeare put these words into the mouth of Hamlet: 'What a piece of work is man. How noble in reason! How infinite in faculties! In action how like an angel! In apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world, the paragon of animals!'

How I wish we could stop there! But there is another side to our humanness, a darker side which we wish we could ignore but which keeps reasserting itself, and of which in our better moments we are profoundly ashamed. It is our human evil.

2. The shame or depravity of human beings

Europe knows all about evil. In this century, two world wars have left 50 million people dead - the worst slaughter in the history of the human race! We can think of the depression between the wars whose aftermath is still with us in the joblessness and homelessness of urban decay. We think of ethnic conflict in Europe and 'ethnic cleansing' in supposedly civilised post-war Europe; the increase of violent crime; the breakdown of family life; the resurgence of fascism and anti-Semitism; and, of course, the awful rape and the murder of children which has so profoundly shocked Belgium and the rest of Europe.

Evil. Alongside the dignity we have to set the depravity of man. And alongside the glory is the shame of our own humanness.

Jesus spoke of this himself. His most outspoken statement is recorded in the Gospel of Mark, chapter 7: (verses 21-23) From within out of the human heart come evil thoughts, immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a person unclean.

So our Lord Jesus Christ, arguably the greatest ethical teacher who ever lived, and who certainly taught the intrinsic value of human beings, did not teach our fundamental goodness. He insisted on the contrary on our innate human capacity for evil.

From these words of Jesus we may learn four important lessons about human evil:

a. The extent of human evil is universal. Jesus was not describing some particularly degraded tribe. He was not portraying the criminal segment of the human community. On the contrary he was talking with those religious and righteous people called the Pharisees. About them and everybody else he made a general statement about the human race: out of the heart of man, any man, woman or child, proceeds all the evil things and they defile human beings. The extent of human evil is universal.

b. The essence of evil is self-centredness. Jesus lists no fewer than thirteen different evils, and every one of them is an expression of basic self-centredness. The Oxford Dictionary lists more than 50 words in the English language compounded with 'self' which have a pejorative meaning: e.g. self-advertisement, self-applause, self-assertion, self-gratification, self-indulgence, self-glorification, self-pity, and so on. Why is the English language so rich in these words? Are the English the most self-centred people in the world, or is it a characteristic of our humanness?

Sin is the reversal of God's order. God told us to love the Lord our God with all our being, and then to love our neighbour as ourselves; to put him first, and neighbour next, and our self in the background. Sin is precisely the reversal of the order: me first, my neighbour next when it suits my convenience (which is not very often) and then God somewhere in the distant background. We are all imprisoned in what Malcolm Muggeridge used to call the 'dark little dungeon of my own ego.'

Dag Hammarskjöld, former secretary-general of the UN, was called 'that great good and loveable man'. But he had a different opinion of himself. In his autobiographical study, 'Markings' he wrote of 'that dark counter centre of evil in our nature' and he bemoaned it of himself. He spoke of it being at its worst when our unselfish service of other people becomes the foundation of our own self-esteem. That is something sick in our humanness.

c. The source of evil is the human heart. One might almost say that Jesus introduced us to Freudianism centuries before Freud; because what Jesus called 'the heart' is roughly speaking what Freud meant by 'the unconscious'. It's like a very deep well: normally the thick deposit of mud at the bottom of the well is unseen and unsuspected. But when the waters of the well are stirred by the winds of violent emotion, the most evil-looking, evil-smelling filth bubbles up from the bottom and breaks the surface: greed, anger, malice, hate, cruelty, revenge.... Then we who are so proud of our social respectability are horrified by these glimpses we get of the basic evil of our own nature, or the evil of which we are capable from our own heart.

d. The consequence of evil defiles us: It makes us unclean in the sight of God and unfit for the presence of God either in this life or in the next.

So Jesus said all these evils come from inside and they defile people. They make them dirty. Indeed all those who caught even a momentary glimpse of the majesty and the glory of God have not been able to bear the sight. Like Moses, they have shrunk away and hidden their face because they were afraid to look upon God. This is the shame of our humanness. Human evil is universal in its extent, self-centred in its nature, inward in its origin and defiling in its effect.

So we human beings are a strange tragic paradox. We are capable of the loftiest nobility and the basest cruelty. We are able to behave at one moment like God is whose image we were made, and in the next moment like the beasts from whom we were meant to be forever distinct. We are able to think, to choose, to create, to love, to worship; and we are also able to hate, to covet, to fight and to destroy. Strange bewildering paradox! Why, we are the inventors of hospitals for the care of the sick, cathedrals for the worship of God! We are the inventors of universities for the acquisition of wisdom! But we are also the inventors of torture chambers, concentration camps, and nuclear arsenals! This is the paradox of our humanness. We are noble and ignoble, rational and irrational, godlike and bestial. Strange paradox!

Listen to this eloquent expression of this paradox, from the primate of Scotland, Bishop Richard Holloway:

This is my dilemma:

I am dust and ashes, frail and wayward,
a set of predetermined behavioural responses,
riddled with fears, beset with needs,
the quintessence of dust,
and unto dust I shall return.

But there is something else in me.

Dust I may well be,
but troubled dust, dust that dreams,
dust that has strange premonitions
of transfiguration,
of a glory in store,
a destiny prepared,
an inheritance that will one day be my own.

So my life is stretched out
in a painful dialectic between ashes and glory,
between weakness and transfiguration.

I'm a riddle unto myself,
an exasperating enigma,
this strange duality of dust and glory

The paradox of our humanness reveals both the need and the hope of redemption. Because of the evil in us, we need to be redeemed. Because of the divine image we bear, which is distorted but not destroyed, such redemption is possible! No human being is irredeemable and no human society is irreformable. It is possible for human beings to be changed! And it is possible for human societies to be changed! They are not beyond the transforming power of Jesus Christ. That's why Jesus Christ is the hope of Europe and the rest of the world! So how does the gospel address our European and human predicament? Now we turn from diagnosis to cure.

II. Cure: The Gospel of Jesus Christ

1. The Gospel is good news of a new life.

The Marxist vision of a new man has faded. The Christian vision of the new person remains. Let's be clear what it is. Jesus spoke of evil as issuing from the heart (its origin), and defiling people (its consequence). So our double need is plain: cleansing from defilement and a new heart with new desires and new aspirations.

The gospel of Jesus Christ speaks directly to these needs and makes us a double offer that corresponds to these needs: Christ died for us identifying himself with our human sin and guilt bearing in his own innocent person the condemnation we deserved in all order that we might be forgiven. Christ was raised from the dead in triumph so that we may live in the power of the resurrection.

There is a constant tendency, even in the church, to trivialise the gospel, to speak of becoming a Christian as if it were no more than becoming a bit religious and thus adding a thin layer of piety to an otherwise secular life. Prick the veneer, scratch the surface and there is the same old pagan underneath. Nothing fundamental has changed. But no! Becoming a Christian is not a Herculean effort at self-improvement. It is the new birth. It is a birth from above by the power of Jesus Christ. It is even a new creation, so that the Apostle Paul can write that if anybody is united to Christ there is a new creation. The old things have passed away and new things have come. Becoming a Christian is something so radical that no imagery can do it justice but death and resurrection: dying to the old life of self-centredness and sin, and rising to a new life of holiness and love.

It is in this sense that Jesus Christ is the hope of Europe. His transforming power can still repair broken lives, and broken marriages and broken homes. The gospel of Jesus Christ is good news for a new life.

2. Good News of a New Community

God's purpose is not just to save or redeem isolated individuals, and so perpetuate our loneliness. God's purpose is to build a new society, a new community, even a new humanity. Because we are told by the Apostle Paul that Christ died for us not only to redeem us from all iniquity but to purify for himself a people who are enthusiastic for good works. So then the Church which is meant to be the new community, a new society, is part of the gospel. The church is a sign of the Kingdom of God. It is a visible demonstration of what the human community looks like when it comes under the rule of God. God's new community has new values, new standards, new ideals. It is called to be different from the surrounding culture and even to develop a Christian counterculture.

What are some of the characteristics of the new community of Jesus?

a. It has a new identity - not in ethnicity, nor nationalism, but in Christ, in whom there is neither Jew nor gentile, slave nor free, male nor female. We are all one in Christ. We have a new identity.

b. It has a new leadership style - in the world, Jesus said, rulers and leaders exercise their authority. They boss people around. Not so among you, said Jesus. Leadership in the Christian community is to be totally different. Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant. Jesus Christ introduced to the world a new style of leadership, servant leadership, characterised not by authority but by humility. Bible scholar T.W. Manson, says: 'Service is not a stepping stone to nobility; it is nobility.'

c. It has a new economic lifestyle - it avoids the opposite extremes of asceticism or materialism; the austere asceticism that denies the good gifts of a good Creator on the one hand, and on the other, covetous materialism which suffocates the human spirit. In place of those two opposites it develops in solidarity with the poor, a lifestyle of simplicity, generosity and contentment. A new economic lifestyle.

d. It has a new way of settling disputes - not by retaliation and revenge, not by appeasement and cheap peace, but by principled peacemaking or conciliation, which does not overlook evil but overcomes evil with good.

e. It has a new set of ambitions - in obedience to the teaching of our Lord, we seek first, not material comfort, but God's kingdom and righteousness. That is our new ambition.

This vision of God's new community operating by new values and new principles sounds absurdly idealistic to some, and it shames our shabby performance in the church. But, thank God, dotted about in Europe and the rest of the world there are Christian communities which exhibit these very characteristics and ideals. Those communities embody the gospel. They do not only proclaim it. They offer to the world an alternative social reality. They give hope to Europe and the rest of the world.

3. The gospel is good news of a new world.

Both Jesus and his apostles (especially Peter, John and Paul) spoke confidently of a new world that is yet to come. Jesus spoke of the rebirth (palingenesia) of the universe. The Apostle Peter wrote of a new heaven and a new earth which will be the home of righteousness and peace. John in his great vision in the book of Revelation says, I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth have passed away. The Apostle Paul in that great passage in Romans 8 writes that the present creation will one day be liberated from its present bondage to decay and pain. And he goes on to say that the groans of the present creation are like the birth pangs of a new order that is struggling to be born.

But what is the relation between this world and the next, between the first heaven and the first earth, and the new heaven and the new earth? What is the relations between the present and the future, between history and eschatology?

To be sure, the future is already present. The end has already begun, because when Jesus came he ushered in the Kingdom of God; he ushered in the new age or the new world. So we are living in between times, between Kingdom come and Kingdom coming. Between Kingdom inaugurated and Kingdom consummated, between the already and the not yet.

But what is the relation between the present and the future, between history and eschatology? Three main answers have been given. The first we may reject, and the second and third we should accept.

a. The future drugs us to acquiesce in the present. That of course was Marx's criticism of religion as the opiate of the masses - and mind you Marx was right, because religion has been used sometimes to dope the oppressed into accepting their oppression. In this sense religion and the promise of justice in the next world has been an opium. It has been a disincentive to social action and social justice. But not necessarily.

b. The future inspires us to action in the present. Far from drugging us into inactivity, the true Christian hope is an incentive not a disincentive. The vision of the future is a revelation of the ultimate will of God. We begin to understand more clearly the kind of community God wants the human community to be. It stimulates us to seek on earth at least an approximation of the heavenly vision. Of course, we'll never be able to create a perfect society but we can approximate to it.

The vision we are given in Revelation chapter 7, of a multinational, multicultural community, the great multitude that no man can number standing before the throne of God, inspires us to internationalism now. The Christian community must become increasingly multicultural for the final vision that is to come.

The vision of world peace, of a day that is coming when sword will be beaten into ploughshares, and nations will learn war no more, that vision inspires us to be peacemakers now, because peace is the will of God.

The vision of a universe in which disease, pain and death are abolished inspires us to fight those evils now because they are evidently displeasing to God.

The vision of a new heaven and a new earth which will be the home of justice inspires us to pursue justice now. The eschatological vision far from promoting inaction supplies direction and inspiration for our present work today.

c. The future assures us of the value of our present labour. If there were a total discontinuity between this world and the next so that nothing from this world survived the judgement and the final conflagration, it is rather discouraging to our work in the present. Our present labours would be seriously devalued if they do not last in any sense whatever. But if there is a kind of continuity between this world and the next, so that some of human culture will be preserved for the next world, then our present work would increase in value. Is this a biblical concept? It is! In Rev 21:24, we read: The kings of the earth will bring their splendour into the new Jerusalem. Verse 26: the glory and the honour of the nations will be brought into the holy city. Of course, nothing impure will ever enter in (v.27). But are we not authorised to say that everything that is good, beautiful and true in human culture, including the magnificence of European culture, once purged of every taint of idolatry and evil, will survive and adorn the new Jerusalem? If there is to be both continuity and discontinuity between our present body and our resurrection body, will there not be continuity and discontinuity as well between our two worlds? Isn't that what the Apostle Paul meant when at the end of his great chapter on the resurrection he said, always give yourself to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain. Why is our present labour not in vain? Because it has a future in the Kingdom of God and the new Jerusalem.

Conclusion

Christians are not utopians. We cannot build a perfect society on earth. Perfection awaits the Parousia. Even our best accomplishments are a mixture of good and evil. They reflect the paradox of our humanness, the evil as well as the good.

Nevertheless we do believe in the transforming power of Jesus Christ. It is by his power that he offers us in the gospel a new life, a new community, and one day a new world.

It is in this sense that Jesus Christ is the hope of Europe and Jesus Christ is the hope of the world.

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30-Days – Calling all Christians to pray for all Muslims.