

Proverbs Wisdom

Proverbs 22:1-4, 7-8

I recently spoke to someone who would not describe themselves as a religious believer, about a house purchase they were involved in.

What happened is that the original purchase had fallen through.

The would-be purchasers had then been approached to up their offer and refused.

And now they were hoping that their original offer would be enough to buy the house.

And he, the unbeliever, said,

“I’ve cast it up to the universe.

Let’s see if the universe will give it back to me”

What was going on in there, in that conversation about house purchases?

In the idea of casting it up to the universe?

I think that statement says: the universe has some kind of shape to it; it has a moral shape.

That some vestige of “do the right things and good will be come to you,”

“Reap what you sow,”

Something of that is still there.

It’s saying: there is a universe which notices,

which holds a shape.....

I’m not going as far as to say there is a God, but a moral universe – yes.

It’s not all blind, pitiless chance.

Or that old Scots phrase, which once again I have heard uttered with the most conviction by people who would regard themselves as agnostics:

“What’s for you will not go by you...”

And the book of Proverbs abides with this conviction:

that this universe has moral shape.

Like the time - and I have related this before -

when my Dad, in the 1980s, said to me that the giant of Communism would fall,

because evil would always fail

and good would triumph.

There is this idea that the universe has moral shape,

and that you commit yourself to that.

Proverbs 22: 8-9

“Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity

and the rod of anger will fall.

Those who are generous are blessed
For they share their bread with the poor.”

That phrase in the Hebrew, for generous, actually means “Good eye”
The Hebrew word for this is “Tob” = Goodness.

It’s the same word that God uses when he looks at the world in Genesis and says,
“It is good.”
It is Tob.

Again and again, in the beginning of creation,
God is looking at what he has made and says,
“Tob.”

And now the same word is applied to your eye
“Those with a good eye are blessed,
They share their bread with the poor”

“A good name is to be chosen more than riches
Favour is better than silver or gold.”

The book of proverbs says that we are to align ourselves with the goodness of the universe.
The universe is good.
We are good.
The universe will be kind
because God is good.

Its message might be
“Live with goodness, in a world that God has made good.”

Everywhere, in every place.

And even where the scales of the world seem to be weighted against us;
even when this moral law seems to have broken down.

Keep holding on to the idea of being good.
Because, behind the universe, isn’t just a law -
but *God*,
Yhwh, the One who holds it
even in the teeth of hell.

Keep moving towards the good.

Victor Frankl, the great Jewish thinker who wrote after the holocaust had a very particular
memory...

“We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms -- to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.”

Ernest Gordon

I want to close with the story of Ernest Gordon.

Ernest Gordon was a Scot, a naval officer who found himself sailing around Singapore in 1942. This was not a good place to be in 1942 and he was captured by the Japanese. Ernest Gordon was put into a prison camp; it turned out to be one of the worst prison camps that the Japanese had.

The Japanese were trying to build a railroad, so they could invade India, and it meant building a railway through Thailand and Burma, and meant going through this terrible swamp, which had these terrible diseases. And so they flooded this swamp with prisoners, because it was dirty, hard labour. Ernest Gordon estimated that 80,000 men died in the building of that railway, 393 men per mile.

He was an officer and was not meant to be used for manual labour, but the Japanese had not signed the Geneva convention, so he was made to work. He caught malaria and diphtheria, and dysentery.

The diphtheria was so bad that it burned away the back of his throat. When he tried to eat rice, it would come back up his nose. His legs were paralysed, so they took him down to the death hut, where they lined up men who had only a few days to live, head to toe in this area. Several hundred men were in the area, waiting to die.

At this time, something very strange happened in the camp.

The healthier soldiers and sailors went out to dig, and every day they would come back into the camp, and they would be counted back. And all the spades that they had used, they too would be counted back.

You did not want an unaccounted shovel in a prison camp.

On this day, there were only nine shovels, when there should have been 10 shovels. The officer started shouting at the men, but the men said nothing. If you don't tell me who stole this shovel, I will kill every one of you.

He cocked his rifle and pointed it the first man in the line. At this, another officer stepped forward and said, “It was me who stole the shovel.” At this the guard went berserk and took his rifle butt and hit him with the butt, and he stabbed him with his bayonet and kicked him, long after he had died.

Then the men went back to the camp, and they found the missing shovel. This officer hadn't taken the shovel at all, he had given his life to save that first man, and possibly more of them.

That night the men were talking and one of the soldiers said, "I remember this verse from Sunday school: 'greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.'

"And the Japanese have won because we have become like animals. If there is a gristly piece of meat floating in the soup, then we all fight to take it, so that *you* don't get it. It's beast against beast. We're not like that, we can't let them win. We have got to change." So they said, "There's a chap here who has studied philosophy at Cambridge University. Perhaps we should appoint him chaplain. What's his name?"

"It's Ernest Gordon."

"Oh, I'm sorry, he's already in the death hut."

So they went down, and they found Ernest Gordon in the death hut, waiting to die, and they said to him "Is it true that you studied philosophy at Cambridge University?"

"Well, yes."

"Well, we wondered if you would be our chaplain?"

"Well, I'm not sure if I really believe in God."

"Well, that's okay but will you be our chaplain?"

So they took him out of the death hut and they built a special bamboo hut for him, and a Methodist and a Catholic came each day and they massaged his legs, and they found ways to force food down him, and they brought him back to health.

And in the meantime, as he is resurrected, Ernest Gordon starts reading the Bible from cover to cover, beginning at Genesis, and he becomes a believer.

And the first thing he does is, he says, "We've got to have a proper chapel."

So they build a chapel at the highest point at the swamp.

And he says, "We've got to have a proper burial for each man who dies, because, when they die, we just throw them in a pit. And when they die, we must give them a proper burial, because it has to be made known that, when they leave, they create a hole in this place. They leave a hole in the universe; they matter."

And as he started doing these things, the whole morale of the camp changed.

This was in the 1940s (when people did these things at school) and they discovered that there was a knowledge of nine different languages amongst the men in the camp: Greek, Hebrew, Latin, German, Russian, Spanish, French...

And they started this camp university, and the men would go out and work in the railway, and then they would come back and study. And they would take classes. At first the Japanese thought this was crazy and they were alarmed by it, but they saw that the men were happier and better workers.

There was even a soldier there who had served as the librarian for the London Symphony Orchestra, and he had photographic memory and he wrote out every note of every symphony by Beethoven and Schubert and most of Mozart. And they carved instruments out of bamboo and created a prison orchestra and they started giving concerts and they had a theatre troop, and every one of these men said,

“We hope that this is not all that there is.”

“We hope that we do not spend the rest of our lives in this place which is like Dante’s inferno.”

“I hope that I can get back to the heather covered hills of Scotland.”

“I hope that I can get back to the parks of London.”

“I hope that that’s where I spend the rest of my life.”

But, for as long as I am here, I will act like a Scot, I will live like a Scotsman.
I will live out the values of my world, even in this hellhole.

As it turned out, Ernest Gordon enjoyed being a chaplain. And soon the allies came and liberated the camp. The prisoners pled for the lives of the guards who had so brutalised them – don’t kill them, don’t murder them, treat them justly.

And Ernest Gordon came to America. He served there as chaplain until the year 2002 when he died.

Find the goodness in the world.
Find the goodness in you.
And live it.
And the universe will be kind.
And God will remember.

“Those who have a good eye will be blessed
For they share their bread with the poor”.

AMEN