

## TESTING THE CHURCH

I was in a discussion meeting with other ministers in Orpington and the topic was "Celebration." The first question we were asked was "*how would you describe your attitude to life? Are you generally positive in the way you talk or do you tend to be rather negative?*"

We all looked at the floor. Then I said, "*well, you know that programme called "Grumpy Old Women....."*" they all laughed and I waited hopefully for someone to say "*but of course that is not you, Jennifer,*" only nobody did.

And the more we thought about it, the more we realised just how negative our thinking and our speaking could be. We grumbled, we sighed, we made gloomy predictions, not just occasionally but habitually.

It was actually quite disconcerting to think of how negative our entire culture has become. Think of the news- how many minutes of good news do we hear compared with the hours of bad news? How many columns in a newspaper are written in praise of people compared with the number of columns that tear them to shreds? How many conversations do we overhear on trains or in shops that are full of grumbles and complaints as opposed to those that are bursting with praise and celebration? Just try and take notice over the next week or so of how much you hear that is positive and how much you hear that is negative, including what comes from your own mouth. It could alarm you.

It is frightening to think that in a free society with a fairly high standard of living- a lifestyle which millions of people who live on the brink of starvation or under a horribly oppressive regime could hardly dare to dream of- with all that we have, we are still so gloomy, so fed-up, so frustrated, so pessimistic. Think of all those teenagers who have been taking their own lives in South Wales; think of the escalating drug and alcohol abuse; the rising crime figures; the growth in mental illness: we are a comfortable society but, I suspect, a deeply unhappy one. It is as though we are giving up on life.

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Despair has been called a sin. And if despair means to give up on life; to give up on yourself; to see no hope of anything better, then yes, that is a sin because it is a highly destructive state of being. And, if you think about it, from this particular sin come just about all the others.

It is when you have given up on yourself that you take drugs, sniff glue, binge drink, put up with abuse from others because you think you are worthless.

It is when you have given up on love that you are sexually promiscuous, that you lie, cheat and hurt.

It is when you have given up on the human race that you abuse others, intimidate them, threaten them with violence, shrug your shoulders and walk away when you see them in need.

It is when you have given up on justice that you are corrupt in business and politics, that you feel free to steal, destroy and kill, that you grumble endlessly about an unfair society but do nothing to challenge it.

It is when you have given up on the world that you stop caring about waste and pollution and destruction.





People sometimes think that if you have faith, then surely you should have an easier life. But you do not. Cruel things happen to those with faith just as much as to those without. But with faith you do not, quite, give up on life because it is not down to you. People sometimes think that if you have faith, you will automatically be a much nicer, better behaved person. But you are not-always. You still do bad things and make big mistakes. You just do not quite give up on yourself because it is not down to you. People sometimes think that if you have faith, you will withdraw from the world and only be interested in religious things. But if you have faith then you engage with the world, you get involved with the world because you cannot give up on it. You want to save it because it is God's world. And you try to save it with love not with violence, because that is God's way of saving.

And people sometimes think that if you have faith you will be always confident about what you believe, endlessly smile through troubles and tragedies. But you are not and you don't. You have your doubts and your dark nights of the soul just like everybody else. You just don't quite give up on God.

When a child is baptised, it is a celebration for all those involved but it is also a challenge. We have a vulnerable life placed into our care and what are we hoping to offer him? Like any other human being Adam will have good times and bad times. He'll get things right and he'll get things wrong. He'll know happiness and sadness, achievement and failure, pain and healing. Despite the best efforts of those who love him so much, he will not have a perfect life.

Our challenge is in teaching him how to overcome despair; how to keep going, keep hoping, keep believing in goodness and truth, in love and in laughter, in himself and in the human race; how to save him from giving way to all the evil in the world.

There is only way he will do this and that is by faith in God, the giver of living water. No human person is strong enough to save him and he will never be strong enough to save himself. Only God can give him the ultimate weapon against despair so that he never gives up, never gives in, always hopes, always believes, always trusts.

So tell him of his baptism. Tell him of the water in the font which was sprinkled on his head. Tell him of the living water, the spirit of God, which will be constantly poured into his life as he asks for it. And let us remind and encourage each other to keep receiving that spirit for ourselves so that our lives and our church will be endlessly renewed.

Amen.