

TOO SMALL TO FAIL – God’s way

One of the books I’ve finally got round to reading this strange summer has been the 900 pages of *Middlemarch*, which Virginia Woolf called, ‘one of the few English novels written for grown ups’. In it, Mrs Cadwallader, the rector’s wife says this: ‘Oh my dear, when you have a clergyman in your family you must accommodate your tastes: I did that very early. When I married Humphrey I made up my mind to like sermons, and I set out by liking the end very much. That soon spread to the middle and the beginning, because I couldn’t have the end without them.’

So let’s get the beginning out of the way quickly so we can get to the end. Because the beginning has to be about Covid (does it not?), everybody’s obsession.

There’s been a lot of talk about businesses that are ‘too big to fail.’ And yet Covid has made fools of us all. Nothing is sacrosanct, and no business immune – from airlines and train franchises to hospitality companies and household names on the High Street. Our MP and Chancellor has been trying this week to support the firms that should survive because they have a long term future.

But that whole axiom that some things are ‘too big to fail’ has a pretty poor track record. Think dinosaurs. Or the Roman Empire. Think the Titanic, or the Soviet Union behind the Iron Curtain. Think British Leyland, British Steel, Lehman Brothers, Enron, Woolworths, Thomas Cook. Even Allan Greenspan, former chairman of the Federal Reserve, said: ‘If they’re too big to fail, they’re too big.’

What is safe today? What is ‘too big to fail’?

When people built the Tower of Babel to reach to the heavens they were sure their project was too big to fail. But seeing their hubris, God got stuck in and confused their languages, and as a result people were scattered all over the world. The myth of Babel is often seen as a negative, but actually, by letting the huge project fail, God was scattering seeds of hope and human ingenuity all over the future. Go local, he was saying, stay small.

God was revealing a better way than monolithic size and scale – it was the way of being *too small to fail*. And that’s what he showed us in Jesus.

It’s put beautifully in today’s epistle, the famous hymn in chapter two of Paul’s letter to the Philippians, ‘Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.’

This was crazy, utterly counter-cultural stuff in the context of the ancient world. This was a world where the heroes and kings who came to be thought of as gods were people like Alexander the Great, who basically conquered the known world before he died aged only 33. Or Emperor Augustus who brought peace to his vast empire with his huge military machine and supreme organisational skills, and was regarded by his subjects as a god. These

were the models for divinity, not an unknown Galilean carpenter who died ignominiously on a bloody cross. It was absurd to think of a man who 'humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross' – to think of him as the God the world needed.

But listen to these words in another of the books I've been reading this summer, Tom Holland's remarkable *Dominion*, which was the winner of huge plaudits last year: 'To be a Christian is to believe that God became man and suffered a death as terrible as any mortal has ever suffered. That is why the cross, that ancient instrument of torture, remains what it has always been: the fitting symbol of the Christian revolution. It is the audacity of it – the audacity of finding in a twisted and defeated corpse the glory of the creator of the universe – that serves to explain, more surely than anything else, the sheer strangeness of Christianity, and of the civilisation to which it gave birth. Today the power of this strangeness remains as alive as it has ever been. It is manifest in the great surge of conversions that has swept Africa and Asia over the last century; in the conviction of millions upon millions that the breath of the Spirit, like a living fire, still blows upon the world; and in Europe and North America, in the **assumptions** of many more millions who would never think to describe themselves as Christian. All are heirs to the same revolution: a revolution that has, at its molten heart, the image of a god dead upon a cross.'

His main argument is that in the West we are all heirs of a Christian heritage, whether we like it or not, in almost every aspect of society's structures and values. 'All are heirs of the same revolution: a revolution that has, at its molten heart, the image of a god dead upon a cross.'

This is a God too small to fail.

Philippians 2 has within it what I called a hymn to Jesus. It's thought to be a hymn that probably predated Paul and was used in the very earliest Christian worship. And it's remarkable for its prescience, its foresight in grasping what the incarnation is really all about – Christ letting go of his glory and emptying himself for us, taking the form of a slave. I spoke the other week about this 'kenosis', this giving away of himself, this humility.

And Paul says, '**Let the same mind be in you.**' You be like that. You empty yourself of selfishness and bravado, as Jesus did. But gosh we've found that hard. We love size and scale. Big is best, in Big we trust, might is right, lets build bigger barns. EF Schumacher wrote an influential little book in the 1970s: '*Small is Beautiful: economics as if people mattered,*' and it dared to challenge the multi-headed beast of greed and growth. But God got there first.

'Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.' Let go of your Tower of Babel, let go of power and control and monolithic structures. Give power away, let the local flourish, take the role of the servant, and if it leads to the cross, so be it. Resurrection follows – see the rest of the hymn.

The Christian secret is this – God became too small to fail, and he invites us to do the same. This is the way the Kingdom works, and so ultimately this is the way the world works.

Another word for this secret is Love. Love gives power away, love lets the local flourish, love take the form of a servant.

So I finish with a favourite poem by Godfrey Rust called 'Welcome to the real world.'...

*I'm beginning to understand.
I saw a sign once
outside a church. It said
Are you really living
or just walking around
to save the cost of a funeral?*

*I didn't know
that Love is real life
and everything else
just a more or less entertaining way
of dying.*

*And I didn't know
that Love is like nothing on earth.*

*Love isn't what you fall in.
It's what pulls you out
of what you fall in.*

*Love is isn't a good feeling.
Love is doing good
when you're feeling bad.*

*Love means hanging in
when everyone else
shrugs their shoulders
and goes off to McDonalds.*

*Love means taking the knocks
and coming back
to try and make things better.*

*Love hurts.
It's its way of telling you
that you're alive.*

*And the funny thing is that after all
Love does feel good.
People say Love is weak
but Love is tougher than Hate.
Hating's easy.
Most of us have a gift for it.*

*But Love counts to ten
while Hate slams the door.
Love says you
where Hate says me.*

*Love is the strongest weapon
known to mankind.
Other weapons blow people up.
Only Love puts them back together again.*

*And everything that seems real,
that looks smart,
that feels good,
has a sell-by date.
But Love has no sell-by date.
Love is long life.
Love is the ultimate preservative.*

*I don't know too much about Love
But I know a man who does,
up there on a cross
Loving us to death.*

*Love is the key
to the door of the place
he's prepared for you
in the kingdom of God.*

*If you're beginning to understand
then welcome to the real world.*

You could say, therefore, that love, in all its myriad details, is what's really too small to fail.