

Views from the Pews: Optimists and pessimists

There is a story about an American who was determined to see the Loch Ness monster. He travelled to Scotland, and asked the locals for information about it. One of them took him to the place she saw it, in the hope that it might appear again. They sat there for a while, but saw nothing. She commented, “Well, we may not be able to see it today, but it’s there”. He replied, “When I see it, then I will believe it”. She looked at him pityingly. “Oh no, you’ve got it all the wrong way round. You won’t see it until you believe it”.

The problem is, we don’t see things in order to understand the world, we first decide what we can understand, and then we can see it. Take, for example, the difference between optimists and pessimists. Most of us can think of cheerful people who can remain positive in the face of tragedy, and others with the opposite characters. The contrast is simple to explain. Cheerful people unconsciously make up their minds in advance that the world is a good place to be in, then look for evidence to support that view. They always find it, because their heads are equipped with a set of positive compartments (with labels like “it was all for the best”, or “God will put it all right”) to accommodate everything that happens to them. A deep, unquestioning faith helps optimists face death with calm assurance of something better around the corner. Pessimists too always find evidence to confirm their attitude, because they can slot it only into their mental compartments with labels such as “there, see, I knew it wouldn’t work”, or, “told you, the rotters always win”. Ideas that cannot be safely plugged into our pre-existing filing systems cannot be understood at all, so they are labelled as irrelevant, and become invisible.

The Saducees’ question, as reported by Luke, assumed that the rules governing normal human relationships will continue after death. Jesus’ response, that all our social conventions will be swept away when we become “equal to angels” must have astonished them. He shows just how limited are our ideas about resurrection life. God’s love and mercy are much bigger than any of our expectations, and those who love him will eventually find themselves surrounded by glory far exceeding the ideas of even the wildest optimists.

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