

Living in an Age of Anxiety

By Peter Barnes

In 1965 E. R. Dodds wrote an historical work entitled *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* where he dealt with the period between the Roman Emperors, Marcus Aurelius, who reigned from 161-180, and Constantine, who was victorious in Rome in 312 and who died in 337. The title, however, leaves one with the impression that every age is an age of anxiety. Edward Gibbon famously considered – ‘without hesitation’ no less – that the age from the death of Domitian to the accession of Commodus (i.e. from A.D. 96-180) was the period during which ‘the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous’. How he gauged that is an intriguing question. The fact is that, while all ages are not identical, they are all full of sin, and so full of anxiety. Things are not as they were in the original creation nor as they will be in the new heaven and new earth. Anxiety is a part of the Fall. This is true even for the regenerate. The apostle Paul was anxious for all the churches (2 Cor.11:28).

The worst response to anxiety may well be to try to take control of events in a wrong-headed way. There is a measure of peace in knowing that we do not know what tomorrow will bring (James 4:14). We tend to overdo it these days, and concoct Five-Year Plans and the like. These occupy somebody’s time and energies, but they may have little connection to reality. This is not to say that we do not plan; we do. Paul, for example, expressed the hope that he could spend some extended time with the Corinthian church ‘if the Lord permits’ (1 Cor.16:7). What Paul intended (2 Cor.1:15) did not always come about (2 Cor.1:23). For that change of mind, he was roundly criticised, but he was in the habit of making serious, yet flexible, plans.

When a political leader declares with Churchillian gusto that ‘We will get through this because we are Australians’, we ought to recognise that for what it is: hot air. The Psalmist took solace in God: ‘My times are in Your hands’ (Ps.31:15a). Rejoice for this means that our times

are not in our hands. The times may be troubled – they usually are – but there is peace in knowing that they are in God’s hands, even if that means that we do not know what will happen tomorrow. A true divine peace is better than a counterfeit human security.

Our task now, as always, is not to control the future but to be faithful in the present. Blaise Pascal noted the human condition: ‘I discovered that all the unhappiness of man stems from one thing, that he cannot remain alone in a room.’ Anxiety comes more from within than from without. Isolation and a sense of abandonment will grieve many, but we must try not to be overcome by what we cannot control. Paul sought to be found faithful (1 Cor.4:2), and he knew the grace of Christ was sufficient (2 Cor.12:9). In 362 the emperor Julian exiled Athanasius from Alexandria for the fourth time, but the great man was not unduly concerned, declaring that this was ‘a small cloud which will soon pass’. And so it proved. Faith does not make us lackadaisical, but determined to be faithful first of all.

We who are of the Reformed faith will affirm that it is Christ who builds His church (Matt.16:18), but we tend to rely on our plans and strategies too. In all the excitement of the expansion of the New Testament church, Philip was told by an angel to go to Gaza which was a desert place (Acts 8:26). It was a long way to go, and highly inconvenient, but God was drawing an unnamed Ethiopian eunuch into His kingdom. Even in evangelism, God’s ways are not our ways. We may be in lockdown, but the Spirit goes where He wills (John 3:8) and the word of God is not bound (2 Tim.2:9). Christ enters closed doors (John 21:19). This is the age of the Messiah, prophesied in Isaiah 35 (cf. Matt.11:2-6): ‘Say to those who have an anxious heart, “Be strong; fear not!” ... He will come and save you’ (Isa.35:4).

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