The Bridge

September 19th, 2021

Roman engineering is one of the wonders of history. Many of the structures they built still stand. Engineers have to navigate the many variables of physics when designing roads, bridges, and edifices of any kind. Sometimes, the Roman engineers had to be flexible with their plans. For example, when building the Pont du Gard, they had to vary the gradient of the aqueduct considerably to reduce the height of the bridge, which was already quite tall: “The aqueduct's average gradient is only 1 in 3,000. It varies widely along its course, but is as little as 1 in 20,000 in some sections. The Pont du Gard itself descends 2.5 cm (0.98 in) in 456 m (1,496 ft), a gradient of 1 in 18,241. The average gradient between the start and end of the aqueduct is far shallower than was usual for Roman aqueducts – only about a tenth of the average gradient of some of the aqueducts in Rome. The reason for the disparity in gradients along the aqueduct's route is that a uniform gradient would have meant that the Pont du Gard would have been infeasibly high, given the limitations of the technology of the time. By varying the gradient along the route, the aqueduct's engineers were able to lower the height of the bridge by 6 metres (20 ft) to 48.77 metres (160.0 ft) above the river – still exceptionally high by Roman standards, but within acceptable limits” (*Wikipedia*, s.v. Pont du Gard). Later in history, this method of construction was largely abandoned because it was too expensive. The Romans kept making aqueducts, but they were flexible in how they approached the problem, replacing large numbers of arches with fewer arches, as in the Aqueduct of Segovia, or replacing stone with concrete. To view these durable, monumental, gigantic and seemingly timeless structures, one would never think of flexibility, and yet none of these bridges or aqueducts would have survived the stresses of time, of heat and cold, of expansion and contraction, without the engineers factoring in such things. It is the same with hope. Hope without flexibility is false hope; it is a hope that can be shattered. One of the most important themes in the kingdom of heaven is change—especially a change of heart. Jesus uses simple concepts from physics to illustrate this: “‘No one tears a piece from a new garment and sews it on an old garment; otherwise the new will be torn, and the piece from the new will not match the old. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins and will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed. But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins” (Luke 5:36-38). Though the exact meaning of old and new in these parables has been debated by scripture scholars, I believe the physics of the parables speak clearly. The older cloth and older leather is not able to withstand change. A person of faith should be open to the new things of God, or they may find themselves in a state of deterioration, like torn garments and burst wineskins.

A good kind of flexibility is openness to the unexpected or unimagined, especially in terms of your life, and openness to the will of the Lord in the unknowns. If you can only picture your life one way, and it does not turn out the way, you will lose hope. A bold picture of the unexpected comes in the early pages of the gospel: “As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, ‘Follow me and I will make you fish for people.’ And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him” (Mark 1:16-20). Imagine having to give up your whole trade, your whole discipline, your whole way of life. The gospel is an end to the old life, the beginning of a new life. When I was an adolescent, I stole bicycles, hung out with thugs in subway stations, arcades and dark cafes, read the well-loved paperbacks of the existentialists, listened to punk rock and had vague dreams of becoming a filmmaker or an artist. Shockingly, my life turned out nothing like the life of Francois Truffaut! What happened? The gospel happened. Change is not limited to new trades, new jobs, or new ministries in the church. Some of the changes can be very hard to understand or articulate. After Legion was cleansed of his demons, he wanted nothing more than to follow Jesus wherever he went—but Jesus did not allow it: “As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed by demons begged him that he might be with him. But Jesus refused, and said to him, ‘Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you.’ And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed” (Mark 5:18-20). The greatest opportunity of his life has come, but Legion is not allowed to follow Jesus—he is sent home to the Decapolis. And yet, in the Decapolis, he praises God and shares the good news to everyone. It is a hopeful story of adapting to a new life. I have had to learn to adapt to several different cultures in four different countries. Immigrants can often relate to this theme much better than those who live in the same cities or cultural milieus their whole lives. Once one has lived in several countries, and has had to adapt to surprising, shocking, even infuriating changes—one begins to realize that adaptation and flexibility are tools—not just for surviving, but even thriving! It is the same with people who survive terrifying injuries or illnesses that confine them to wheelchairs for the rest of their life. They have to be flexible in their new worlds, or they cannot continue living or thriving. There is no hope without flexibility, there is only failure, there is only entanglement in our nets and concealment in our tombs. One must stand up. One must abandon the nets. One must leave the tombs. One must follow Christ into a new way of living, a way of life full of changes, full of the unexpected.

Such hope requires a certain ability to tolerate suspense. In his first epistle, John says: “Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure” (1 John 3:2-3). What we will be has not yet been revealed. Though we have a general sense of God’s redemption, there are more unknown details and mysteries in this life than there are perhaps knowns. Otherwise, we would just be following our own imaginations and false hopes and not living by faith in the unknown God made known. Suspense is a constant theme in the Bible, but especially in the New Testament. Nobody, or almost nobody, stays in the same place for long. The Acts of the Apostles are filled with such stories. Paul wants to go to Bithynia, and the Lord sends him to Macedonia (Acts 16). And once he is there, he baptizes Lydia, who is wealthy enough to provide a house for a church to grow in, and yet Paul gets sent to jail. Once he is released from jail, Paul gets driven out of town. That must have been crushing—being driven away from his newly planted church within a short period of time. I imagine, as a young student or even a young rabbi, Paul never dreamed he would spend much of his older life as a prisoner, hanging out with criminals in dark jails, chained to Roman guards when under house arrest, or shipped across the Mediterranean with other convicts. His life was full of changes; he had to be adaptive and flexible. And he was open to the sudden changes because of the grace that constantly carried him over the waves of time, through all the variables and all the unknowns. Today we do not like to live this way—we are much like the disciples who want to know how the end times will come; we want God to hand over the itineraries, blueprints and spreadsheets. Regarding time, Jesus gives the most unsatisfactory answers possible: “Concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only” (Matthew 24:36). Moments before the ascension, the disciples bring up the matter again: “When they had come together, they asked him, ‘Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?’ He replied, ‘It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority” (Acts 1:6-7). It is not for me to know—I have to be open to whatever the Lord will do in the meantime.

Some of the unexpected things in life can be traumatic. And the gospels portray this vividly as well. The glorious Christ who comes riding into Jerusalem on a donkey in triumph, with myriads of palm fronds and cries of acclamation and glorious praise, is tried, whipped, crucified and stabbed only days later in a most shocking and brutal turn of events the disciples probably never expected. A Saviour who dies. A Lord whose blood is drained into the dust. It seems completely counterintuitive, completely unexpected, completely against the nature and definition of hope itself. Yet Jesus had already warned them of this: “‘Are you discussing among yourselves what I meant when I said, “A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me”? Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy. When a woman is in labour, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you” (John 16:19-22). It is hard for us to imagine that a cross can be a bridge to a resurrection, that traumatic events can lead beyond themselves into moments of peace and even healing. They can, and they have. I am not the only one who has experienced this. I went through traumatic events as a young person—not as bad as other people, but I went through them. I have scars. And those scars became gifts later on because they taught me of the bright days that come after the pain, that hope has rewards. They gave me ways to help other people. A scar is a sign of healing—it is not a wound. One should be extremely worried about an open wound—but scar tissue is a sign of victory, that something painful has been healed and closed.

Thus, to be open to God means also to be open to the possibility that good change can come. Goodness can come in the midst of utter darkness. In one of my favourite films *Andrei Rublev* by Andrei Tarkovsky, which I have mentioned once or twice, there is a scene when Andrei the icon-painter must hide Durochka, the holy fool. The Tatars are burning the town, slaughtering the peasants and assaulting the women. He manages to save her. Then one day, during a famine, the Tatars return to collect tribute. Durochka begins to joke around with one of the horsemen, who promises to marry her. He puts his horned helmet on her head, which she treats almost as a toy, giggling and laughing, and running around. Andrei keeps trying to pull Durochka away from the Tatar. The suspense is incredible. Are the Tatars joking? Will Durochka fall for it? Will Andrei manage to save her again? Of her own volition, Durochka happily runs off with the Tatar horseman. The other Russians try to console Andrei, saying that nothing bad will happen to her—she will be dropped off at a convent, but we do not know. The narrative of the film journeys on into other landscapes and other concerns. A great bell is being cast near the estate of a boyar. The boy who is in charge claims to have the recipe for the metal from his late father. After the bell is finally tested, and sounds wonderfully, the people rejoice, but the boy weeps. He had been bluffing all along—not knowing whether his made-up recipe would work or not. As it turns out, it did work, and the ringing of the bell inspires Andrei to return to icon painting after a long, despairing absence from it. Not long after, at the end of the film, Andrei suddenly sees someone leading a horse and a child—an image that could evoke Mary on her way to Bethlehem. It is Durochka, who smiles happily at him. The other day, a stressed young girl game into the learning centre where I teach with some social studies questions. The first question was: “What is the meaning of life” Logically, I told her, there is only one way to answer that question. I made her think about it for a while. Some of her guesses were close; some a bit far off. And then finally I said to her, “To be happy. That’s the meaning of life.” There is no other answer that is particularly satisfying or rational. I would not want my life to only mean pain, sorrow, grief, defeat, despair, finality, emptiness, monotony. I would want my life to be happy. I would want to be a flexible new wineskin ready for new wine. I would want to be a flexible new garment rather than a shredded garment. Sometimes happiness requires living through sadness. Sometimes happiness requires living through pain. Sometimes happiness means great sacrifice. And *sometimes* happiness requires being happy. And all of the time, it requires hope. It always requires hope. The true happiness, the true hope, is Christ: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1:5). And as we read earlier: “Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure” (1 John 3:2-3). Christ is our hopeful bridge to the happiness beyond.