

8th November 2023

Hope

"If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something."

Howard Zinn, *A Power Governments Cannot Suppress*

In the early years of my ministry, I worked closely with a man who was dying of cancer. An exemplar of stoicism and the value of a deep and lasting faith, I learned more from him than I was ever able to give in return.

His prognosis was uncertain, and, back in the day, life expectancy was unpredictable. But, on a regular basis, I would ask him how he was, as a precursor to some important conversations. A couple of months before Christmas, I had such an encounter. Having asked him how things were, I got this reply: "Well, I've decided not to take out an instalment plan for a new car, but I *have* bought some Christmas cards." This was about living in the present, not denying an uncertain future, but making the most of "the now". And this was also about hope, which was an amazing contribution to a young minister's knowledgebase.

Howard Zinn was an American historian, playwright and philosopher. He was chair of the history and social sciences department at Spelman College, and a political science professor at Boston University. In his book, *A Power Governments Cannot Suppress*, he wrote:

To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. What we choose to emphasise in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places – and there are so many – where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction. And if we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvellous victory.

In the face of all that's happening round about us, I needed to hear this again today, *and* to listen to that man from long ago who bought Christmas cards when he was living with cancer. "If we see only the worst", we have no hope. But if we learn to live "in defiance of all that is bad around us", then hope will surely give us the marvellous victory we crave.

A prayer for today

May I hold on to hope, so that the present can make the future more hopeful. Amen