

# Funding the Future

Deuteronomy 8: 1-19 & Philippians 4: 10-20

*Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time/ 15<sup>th</sup> October 2006*

Where does the future originate? Or, to put it a different way, from whence does the future come? With these questions I'm not asking *how* does the future get here or how do we get to the future. I'm talking about something even more fundamental. When or how did human beings begin to talk about the future? Where does this sense of a future come from? I guess I'm talking about grammar, language and how both serve to organize perception, reflection and experience, grammar as "the nerve structure of consciousness."<sup>1</sup> In his Gifford Lectures delivered at Glasgow University several years ago, George Steiner, truly one of the great intellectual giants of our age, dwells on these questions. He intuits that "the future tense came relatively late into human speech. It may have developed as late as the end of the last Ice Age, together with the "futures" entailed by food-storage, by the making and preservation of tools beyond immediate need, and by the very gradual discovery of animal-breeding and agriculture. Linguistically speaking, the development of a future tense in our grammar is perhaps unique for humans. Animals know presentness and a measure of remembrance. However, "the future tense," Steiner asserts, "the ability to discuss possible event on the day after one's funeral or in stellar space a million years hence, looks to be specific to *homo sapiens*. ...It is only man, so far as we can conceive, who has the means of altering his world by resorting to "if"-clauses, who can generate clauses such as: "if Caesar had not gone to the Capital that day." If I save my pennies, I can buy... If I love, .... If I forgive, ....

Steiner argues that the formation of the future tense "proved indispensable to the survival, to the evolution of the "language-animal" confronted, as we were and are, by the scandal, by the incomprehensibility of the individual death. There is an actual sense in which every human use of the future tense of the verb "to be" is a negation, however limited, of mortality. Even as every use of an "if"-sentence tells of a refusal of the brute inevitability, of the despotism of the fact." These words, "Shall," "will," and "if" point us forward, they are as, he beautifully states, "*pass-words to hope*."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> George Steiner, *Grammars of Creation*. Originating in the Gifford Lectures for 1990 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 6.

<sup>2</sup> Steiner, 7.

The theological dimension of this future orientation of language is not missed on him. The future tense, our ability to conceive of new horizons, new possibilities, determined not by the past, but something utterly different, something *other* is the grammatical foundation for hope. Otherwise any talk of hope would be meaningless, which, precisely, he argues is at stake in a world such as ours which appears to have lost the language of the future, the language of possibility. Can we still say one “hopes to God” and mean it? <sup>3</sup>

Although he has no commitment to Christianity, Steiner makes the powerful observation that the Christian experience is oriented not toward the past, but toward a future. This comes out of Christianity’s origins, indeed Jesus’ own identity as a child of Israel who hopes for the promises of God to be fulfilled. “The kingdom of God as coming, reparation for unjust suffering, of a judgment through which eternity flows” are all strong Christian ideas. Indeed, “the future tense of the verb inhabits nearly every saying of Jesus,” Steiner claims, Jesus “is, for his followers, *hope made flesh*.”<sup>4</sup>

Did you hear the future in Moses’ sermon to Israel? Yes, there was the call to remember lest they forget all that God provided, but the orientation is toward tomorrow, so that God might provide for them the wealth required to fulfill God’s dreams for their covenantal relationship. We remember in order to dream beyond the present, to embrace God’s future. Or hear Paul’s affirmation, “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” He knows this because he remembers his past and knows that God will provide every need. *Paul’s ministry is all about an unshakeable confidence in the future.*

If you read over all the sermons I’ve preached these last seven years here (which I don’t recommend that you do!), you’ll notice that I’ve been doing a lot of preaching and teaching about the future, because I believe this is at heart the necessary vision for this church, because it is necessary for every church: to increasingly think of ourselves as a community of God’s people where *hope is made flesh in us*, followers of the Risen One who through his grace and forgiveness has granted all of us new tomorrows. We are the ones who extend that promise, offering our own “if”-sentences of hope to the world, “If Christ has not been raised,” said Paul, “your faith is futile (1 Corinthians 15: 17).” But if he has been raised, then that is an amazing future, which is an extraordinary foundation for hope.

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<sup>3</sup> Steiner, 8.

<sup>4</sup> Steiner, 9.

This is ultimately what we're funding when we receive the morning offering, funding the future. This confidence in the future is perhaps one of the sources of Christian generosity. It's why Christians, I think, should be some of the most generous people on the planet because we have a love and joy flowing through us that desires to give in love to the hopeful work of the church.<sup>5</sup> This is why I can't understand why there is such dread in the church around budget time or during the autumn pledge drive or why we resist talking about money or feel we have to endure a stewardship sermon or hearing that God has given us prosperity and wealth not to save it or hoard it, but to share it. Martin Luther (1483-1546) once confessed, "I have tried to keep things in my hands and lost them all, but what I have given into God's hands I still possess."

In his book, *Beyond the Collection Plate: Overcoming Obstacles to Faithful Giving*, Michael Durall insists (and I would agree) that one of the major obstacles churches face "stems from transferring our views about personal finance onto the institution of the church. In planning for the future and our eventual retirement, we hope to accumulate as large a net worth as possible. Some churches are preserving their assets, building endowments, saving for that "rainy day" (which never comes), all the while cutting back on investing in programs, services, ministries, or staff, failing to invest in people.<sup>6</sup> Churches sometimes operate under the fear that there's not enough. It's the myth of scarcity. Have you ever noticed we often seem to find the money for the things we really want? The same is true in the church. What do we really want?

*We don't exist to save, but to share.* Henry Hansmann, professor at Yale Law School and a specialist on the economics of nonprofit organizations, writes, "Saving [in the church] is worthwhile only if you have a better use for the money in the future than you have today."<sup>7</sup> *For the church, the future is now, the need is now and the blessing that can be done through our resources is now.*

It seems to me, what we give to the work of the church, what we will pledge to *this* church (or any church) is ultimately connected to that sense of confidence in God's future. Can we still say one "hopes to God" and mean it? What we pledge says something about our confidence in God's future. What we pledge is creating that new future now. *If I give....*

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. the quotation from the worship bulletin: "You can give without loving, but you cannot love without giving." Amy Carmichael (1867-1951), Irish Christian missionary to Japan, Ceylon, and India.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Durall, *Beyond the Collection Plate: Overcoming Obstacles to Faithful Giving*. Foreword by Thomas G. Bandy (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 143.

<sup>7</sup> Cited in Durall, 142.

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