

Thought for the month March 2020

One of the most shocking things once said to me by someone I looked up to as a young person was the observation that 'everything gets worse'. This from a person who in my eyes possessed a positive, forceful character, seeming to confidently put his values into practice and to expect the best of everyone. That positivity was infectious, but now he was telling me what? That his experience of life was a progressive deterioration in everything he held dear? I was dumbfounded.

On the other hand, I've been just as amazed by people confidently stating that everything is happily progressing towards an idyllic future in which technology solves all our problems, all the countries of the world are free and democratic, and in which we all lead lives of leisure. This seems as complacent and fantastical as my friend's analysis was gloomy.

We're told that in historic terms, life now is less of a struggle for the average person than ever before – less violent, healthier, fuller and longer. Perhaps for many of us that's true. Conversely, the news is filled with scenes of irreversible environmental degradation, growing wealth inequality, burgeoning national isolationism and distrust between differing cultural and religious groups within and between societies.

Whatever the balance of good and bad, it saddens me that some children and young people are experiencing the kind of sense of loss that should be reserved for experienced adults like my old mentor. As an experienced adult myself now, I look back on the history of the world in my lifetime and I think it's possible to offer some much-needed encouragement to any young person who is feeling anxious or hopeless about the future.

I was a teen in the 80s. Growing up in the age of mass unemployment, the cold war, national strife between government and people, frankly ropey television, and with racism, sexism and homophobia being largely unquestioned pillars of the prevailing culture, the present times seem to me a profound improvement. Since that time I remember the world coming together to ban ozone-depleting CFCs, the Berlin Wall tumbling under the pressure of people's demand for freedom, the end of apartheid, the peace process in Northern Ireland, increased tolerance and appreciation of religious, sexual and gender diversity, and even lately a massive groundswell of public feeling about the precious value of the natural world.

There are huge challenges in our immediate future and there is still a vast amount of work to be done in all these areas and more. But the lesson from history is that things *can* change for the better. That's what makes it worth demanding those changes from society, our communities and ourselves. As the graffiti I saw on the security wall in Bethlehem says, 'Love wins'. We just have to take part.