

'Put your hand ...'.

I begin by, as it were, putting the clock back over 80 years, to Christmas 1939 and to one of the most famous radio broadcasts ever made. In many ways, the substance of that broadcast is as relevant to the situation facing us at the close of 2020 as it was when it was first aired.

First, then, the words of that recording:

'A new year is at hand. We cannot tell which it will bring. If it brings peace how thankful we shall all be. If it brings continued struggle, we shall remain undaunted.'

'In the meantime, I feel that we may all find a message of encouragement in the lines which, in my closing words, I would like to say to you.'

'I said to the man who stood at the Gate of the Year. "Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown". And he replied. "Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.'

May that Almighty hand guide and uphold us all'.

As some of you will recognise, those are the words of King George VI, speaking three months after the outbreak of the Second World War.¹



The King alluded back to this speech at the close of his VE Day speech on 8 May 1945: 'In the hour of danger we humbly committed our cause into the hand of God and He has been our strength and shield. Let us thank Him for his mercies and in this hour of victory commit ourselves and our new task to the guidance of that same strong hand'.²

The poem from which he quoted in 1939 had been written some 30 years before³ by one Minnie Louise Haskins,⁴ when working as a missionary in India.⁵ Minnie Haskins was then in her early 30s.

Her poem was originally titled 'God knows', but, for obvious reasons, became known later as 'the Gate of the Year'.⁶ The lines the King quoted are good lines ...

I said to the man who stood at the Gate of the Year, 'Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown'. And he replied, 'Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That will be better to you than light, and safer than a known way.'

But I want now to call on a contribution from a man who lived some little time before Minnie Haskins. Tomorrow, 29th of December is the birthdate of William Gladstone, one of the most famous British politicians of the nineteenth century.⁷ During his political career, Mr Gladstone served as Prime Minister four times, and four times as Chancellor of the Exchequer.⁸ The Bible was the spiritual and intellectual foundation of Mr Gladstone's life and in 1891 he published a book under the title 'The Impregnable Rock of Holy Scripture', in which he commended most strongly the trustworthiness of the Bible.

And, good as the lines of the poem are, it is from that 'Impregnable Rock of Holy Scripture' which I wish now to quote. Facing, as we do, a more than usually unknown new year, I take my text from chapter 41 of the prophecy of Isaiah, verse 13:

'I the Lord your God will hold your right hand, saying to you, Fear not; I will help you'.

Although, in its context, this assurance was addressed to the nation of Israel when in captivity in Babylon, we are surely entitled to take hold of this precious promise for ourselves.

And I want to focus this morning in particular on the opening words, 'I the Lord your God will hold your right hand'⁹.

I recall an article which appeared many years ago in the publication 'Our Daily Bread'.¹⁰ The heading of the page read, 'Hold my hand', and the opening paragraph ran, 'The waves of Lake Michigan were high and splashing onto the pier one day as I followed a young family out to a lighthouse. I overheard the young girl say to her father: "Daddy, please walk alongside me and hold my hand at this scary part"¹¹.

And I guess, with the many uncertainties and unknowns, both of the present and the future, you (like me) find life rather 'scary' at times.

And please note that the One who undertakes to hold *your* right hand in Isaiah 41 verse 13, undertakes to 'uphold' you with *His* right hand in verse 10; 'I will uphold you with my righteous right hand'.¹²

So that the One who speaks to reassure His people in their time of need and fear (declaring, 'I the Lord your God will hold your right hand') is one and the same as He who commits Himself to uphold them with His own right hand.

And, I tell you, there is no gauge to measure the power of that 'right hand'.¹³ Hear His word spoken shortly after: 'My hand laid the foundation of the earth, and my right hand spread out the heavens'.¹⁴ 'The heavens', mark you.

I understand that it is currently estimated that the observable universe comprises 'at least two trillion galaxies'.¹⁵ That is 2,000,000,000,000 galaxies, with perhaps, on average, about 100,000,000,000 stars in a galaxy! Well then did King George follow his quotation from Miss Haskins' poem with the words, 'May *that Almighty hand* guide and uphold us all'.¹⁶

Yes, Miss Haskins did well to have 'the man who stood at the Gate of the Year' say, 'put your hand into the hand of God'. Many of us sometimes are familiar with the saying, 'I don't know what the future holds but I know who holds the future'. And that is most wonderfully true. But ponder this too, that *He who holds the future stoops to hold your hand as well!*

'Go out into the darkness', the poem reads, 'and put your hand into the hand of God'; into the firm grip, that is, of Him who, as Jude assures us, 'is able to keep you from falling'.¹⁷

And it is a source of immense comfort and peace to know that our God is more than sufficient to meet whatever trials and troubles may lurk in 'the darkness' ahead, as we venture ahead into the coming year. For, as King David knew well, 'Even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you'.¹⁸

I have read that in 1346, during the so-called 'Hundred Years' War', the English army of King Edward III was heavily outnumbered by French troops at Crecy in northern France. The King's son, also Edward but known perhaps better as 'The Black Prince', who was then only 16 years old, led one of three British divisions, while Edward III stood nearby with a large force, ready to send relief where and when needed.

During the battle, the prince thought he was in danger, so he sent for help. But none came. Young Edward sent another message, pleading for immediate assistance. Apparently, his father responded by telling the messenger, 'Go tell my son that I am not so inexperienced a commander as not to know when help is needed, nor so careless a father as not to send it'.¹⁹

As we face 2021, with its many, many *unknowns*, we have one great '*known*'; namely, that the Lord God Himself (who truly *both (i) knows when we need His help, and (ii) cares too much for us not to give it*) undertakes to hold our 'right hand, saying ... 'Fear not; I will help you'.

And so, having put into the mouth of 'the man who stood at the Gate of the Year' those now famous words, 'Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That will be better to you than light, and safer than a known way', Miss Haskins added, 'So I went forth, and finding the hand of God, trod gladly into the night'.

Let us too, with our hand in His, 'tread gladly' into the impending and rather 'scary' New Year with its many unknowns.

I close by quoting lines from another lady whose life, like that of Miss Haskins, straddled the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. That lady is the renowned hymn writer Fanny Crosby, and the lines run:

Hold Thou my hand; so weak I am, and helpless,
I dare not take one step without Thy aid;
Hold Thou my hand; for then, O loving Saviour,
No dread of ill shall make my soul afraid.

The author of those words later wrote, 'For a number of days before I wrote this hymn, all had seemed dark to me ... I cried in prayer, "Dear Lord, hold Thou my hand". Almost at once', she added, '... peace ... returned to my heart, and my gratitude for this evidence of answered prayer sang itself in the lines of the hymn'.²⁰

So, let us each take to heart that verse of Fanny Crosby's hymn:

Hold Thou my hand; so weak I am, and helpless,
I dare not take one step without Thy aid;
***Hold Thou my hand; for then, O loving Saviour,
No dread of ill shall make my soul afraid.***

Notes

- ¹ Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Gate_of_the_Year.
- ² Source: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4515885.stm>.
- ³ In 1908.
- ⁴ Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minnie_Louise_Haskins.
- ⁵ Which she did from 1907 to 1915.
- ⁶ The poem originally formed part of a small volume entitled 'The Desert'.
- ⁷ His full name was William Ewart Gladstone, and he lived from 1809 to 1898.
- ⁸ This tracked very closely the reign of Queen Victoria, which spanned 1837 to 1901.
- ⁹ Cf. the testimony of the author of Psalm 73: 'you hold my right hand', verse 23.
- ¹⁰ Dated 7th of October 2010. The article was written by Anne Cetas.
- ¹¹ Source: <https://odb.org/2010/10/07/hold-my-hand/>.
- ¹² Cf. David's confidence, 'Your right hand upholds me', Psa. 63. 8, and, 'Your right hand shall hold me', Psa. 139. 10.
- ¹³ This was the 'right hand' which overthrew the Pharaoh of the Exodus and his army in the waters of the Red Sea, Exod. 15. 6-10; Psa. 136. 15.
- ¹⁴ Isa. 48. 13.
- ¹⁵ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Observable_universe.
- ¹⁶ Job 29. 3.
- ¹⁷ Jude 24.
- ¹⁸ Psa. 139. 12.
- ¹⁹ Drawn from https://www.preceptaustin.org/1_corinthians_devotionals (under the heading '1 Corinthians 10').
For the background, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Cr%C3%A9cy.
- ²⁰ Written in 1874. See <http://www.hymntime.com/tch/htm/h/o/l/d/holdthou.htm>.