

The Palestinian elections and the possibility of optimism

Thought for the Day

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If I ask you to list the good and bad things that might happen to you today, which list do you think will be longer?!

I ask because of a fascinating lecture I recently attended by Carol Craig, whose book *The Scots' Crisis of Confidence*, caused a stir last year. Applying the theories of so-called Positive Psychology, she suggested that optimists are people who see problems as temporary obstacles to be ignored or worked round, whereas pessimists see them as permanent and insuperable. So optimists see that long list as a challenge; pessimists go back to bed!

On the other hand, as she pointed out, there are some situations in which pessimism is the sensible approach – when a warning light flashes in the cockpit, you don't want your pilot to look on the bright side and take off anyway!

So is optimism an option about the results of last week's Palestinian elections? Hamas leaders have made it clear they are still committed to the destruction of Israel, and no country can be expected to negotiate its own elimination. On the other hand, polls tell us that two thirds of Palestinians, like two thirds of Israelis, want to coexist peacefully, and that Hamas won not because of its ideology, but because of the schools, health centres, and youth clubs they built.

So there are grounds for optimism.

But the downside is best expressed by the old tale of the scorpion and the frog looking across the Suez Canal. The scorpion asks the frog to carry him across.

- “Are you mad?” replies the frog – “you're a scorpion, and you'll sting me, so I'll drown.”
- “Of course I won't”, says the scorpion, “since I can't swim, if I do that, I'll drown too.”

In the fable, the frog agrees, but half-way across the scorpion stings the frog. As they both drown, the scorpion explains, “I can't help it; I'm a scorpion.”

It takes a lot of optimism to believe that the scorpion could resist its nature – but that's what we must hope for, as we pray for the courage and success of the optimists on both sides.