

Believe in yourself and you can do anything Christ Church @ The Crown

To her high school friends Elle Woods is a likeable but, basically, airhead, blonde whose life ambitions are limited to fashion consciousness and manicure perfection.

But, determined to follow her boyfriend Warner to Harvard law school she makes the grades, gets to uni and, when there, discovers that her boyfriend is, basically, a bit of a scumbag and she's better off without him.

The final scene of the movie is her graduation speech...

"

US President Thomas Whitmore is determined to rescue Earth from the absolute determination of an advanced alien race to annihilate us all and, in the 1996 special effects blockbuster movie Independence Day makes a rousing speech to his troops:

"

If you've seen those two movies, and countless others that Hollywood churns out year after year, how could you possibly have anything bad to say about self-belief? Self-belief is for winners. The survivors of disaster, war and romance are the people with positive thinking. The hesitant are the ones who get hurt or get killed.

And what hold true in the movies pretty much works in real life too. How many millionaire businessmen (or women) do you hear about who aren't totally confident in their own abilities? Roman Abramovitch, Bill Gates, Richard Branson, Margaret Thatcher, James Dyson, Bill Clinton and hundreds more are all people with immense self-belief. In the sporting arena too the people we admire are the can-do people. The ones who KNOW they can make it happen – Sir Clive Woodward, Wayne Rooney, Ellen MacArthur, Tani Grey-Thompson.

Well against such a panoply of stars I want to suggest to you this evening that the concept that "If you believe in yourself you can do anything" is both terrifyingly true and, ultimately, completely empty. The idea that those with self-belief can do anything is horrifyingly accurate – and, at the same time, utterly misleading. And I'll take the two points in that order:

1 Self-belief is both powerful and dangerous

"The first skill each and every one of us should learn, if we are to have any chance of bettering our lives and reaching our dreams, is to develop a strong positive belief in ourselves and our capabilities... If you believe that you will fail, you will! If you believe that you will succeed, you will! If you believe you will be rich, you will be rich. If you believe you are destined for poverty, you will never rise above that. It is a fact, that you become like the person you think and believe you are and achieve only what you think and believe you are capable of."

So reads the entry under life-skill number 1 on one of the web's leading personal psychology web sites. But where do such ideas come from? Of course they've been around, more or less, since the dawn of time. But in our day and age they spring, largely, from the work of one man – the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche.

He was brought up in a Christian home in near Leipzig but, during his time at university, came to the view not only that Christianity was untrue (he became an atheist) but that it was Christian beliefs and moral values that were responsible for most of the problems in the world. He was convinced that it was wrongly thought out Christian morality that kept people from being all that they could be. Nietzsche wrote around 10 big philosophy books, large parts of which are pretty difficult to understand. But a fair summary of what he taught might be this:

There is no god and there is no rational order to the universe. Any morals, values or standards there are were simply constructed by us. But this lack of a foundation does not have to be a disaster for us. If we can get beyond our need for a divine Daddy in the sky we will find that there is massive liberty in affirming that God is dead. It means that life is like a blank canvas. There are no rules – so we are freed to become something new, different and creative. We do not have to carry all the moral baggage of the past. Most people will not have the strength to do this. They will feel the need to rely on rules and authorities to tell them what to do, what to value, how to live. But the ubermen – the supermen (or women) who can learn to live without God well these people, the ones who really believe in themselves, well they will be able to achieve anything. In fact, Nietzsche said those who learn to create their lives

anew will actually represent a new stage in human evolution.

And his ideas had an enormous influence on many of the great characters of the C20th.

Writer Albert Camus
Psychologist Sigmund Freud
Philosophers Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre,
Composer Gustav Mahler
Author and playwright George Bernard Shaw
Poet William Butler Yeats and others.

These people achieved many great things, partly as a result of their conviction that without God they were masters of their own destiny – that with self-belief they could achieve anything they wanted.

But Friedrich Nietzsche has a more famous follower than any of those people I have just listed. His name was Adolf Hitler. Nietzsche made clear that making our own abilities the measure of everything meant that we must go beyond thinking in terms of good and evil. He said that it is not always morally bad to exploit, dominate, and injure the weak. In fact, he said, for those who are able to dominate, the supermen, it is entirely appropriate and right for them to express their will to power in ways that involve lies, deception and masks for them and danger and pain for others.

Believe in yourself and you can do anything. Well, terrifyingly, yes you can. Because for the person who has abolished God and believes in himself there are no moral reference points. There is no way of objectively deciding what is right and wrong. No possibility of a moral compass. All you end up with is what you believe to be the right thing to do to achieve your own goals.

Other people are just means to an end. You have your goals – your own personal ambitions for self-fulfillment, whatever they may be. Sure you can achieve them. But if that is how you decide to live your obligations to other people will always come second to your obligation to fulfill yourself. And that is exactly what we see, lived out in an extreme way, in the life of Hitler.

Now of course, fortunately, most of us don't end up anything like Hitler. But you only have to take a look around the streets of Liverpool on a Saturday afternoon, or even a Sunday night to see the disastrous practical results believing in yourself and your unfettered freedom to choose and live towards your own goals. Our obsession with drink and

recreational drugs. Our national addiction to Euro Millions lottery tickets and credit cards. Our use and dispose view of sexual partners. All of these, and many more, are deeply rooted in the "believe in yourself" philosophy.

The trouble is that we watch *Legally Blonde* and *Independence Day* and observe positive results of self-belief. But there are plenty of negative results too. There's no shortage of self-belief in Al Qaeda is there? And there are countless people, both the powerful and the ordinary, whose own determination that they have a right to power and success has lead them to deceive, manipulate, cheat, steal and even kill in order to get what they want.

In fact we've all done it haven't we? Why do we lie when caught out making a mistake or doing something we ought not to do? Because we believe in ourselves. Because we believe that we are basically the good guys and that we ought to be able to do what we want.

Believe in yourself and you can do anything. It is terrifyingly true.

And the problem is that we are very capable. We CAN do anything! And self-belief provides no boundaries or markers for what is right and wrong. In fact this has been a problem for humanity since the beginning of time. One of the earliest stories recorded in the Bible is the story of the builders of the city of Babel.

¹ Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. ²As men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.

³They said to each other, "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar.

⁴Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth."

⁵But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building. ⁶The LORD said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. ⁷Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other."

⁸ So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. ⁹That is why it was called Babel – because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world. From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

There wasn't any shortage of self-belief in the citizens of Babel. And they had the capacity to do what they wanted. Their problem was that what they wanted to do was wrong – but their self-belief had no way of telling them that!

It's not that God has anything against tall buildings – so anyone here who lives in the big block of student flats just behind me here doesn't need to go home worrying that God disapproves of what floor you live on. No what God has a problem with is their attitude.

"Come," they say, "let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves"

What was wrong was not their desire to test the limits of building design. It was their desire to glorify themselves.

Self-belief is both powerful and dangerous.

2 Self-belief is irrelevant to anything that really matters

As we've seen from the list of people influenced by Nietzsche there is plenty of evidence that, in many areas of life, immense self-confidence is a tool for success.

But I want to suggest to you that all the people we have mentioned who have followed this philosophy, and the millions who hold to it, consciously or unconsciously, today, are inevitably depriving themselves of the things that really matter most in life.

As I said before one of the essential features of the philosophy of self-belief is that it always places you at the centre. And that means that other people are never more than means to an end – the end of you achieving whatever you want to achieve. That doesn't mean, of course, that you are always horrible to other people – there are often, indeed almost always, significant advantages to you to be had by being nice to people. But in the philosophy of self-belief the reason for being nice to people is always, ultimately, that it's good for you. As the philosopher Mark Rowlands puts it, in the end if you have a consistent philosophy of self-belief and self-fulfilment everybody else is just your butt-monkey.

And that is no way to form functional relationships. In fact I suggest the reason that so many family relationships, friendships and romantic relationships fail in our society is that so many of us, basically, think like this most of the time.

The self-belief philosophy destroys your potential for properly functional relationships with other people. And, especially, it means you cannot have a relationship with God.

You see it's not quite true that if you believe in yourself you can do anything. You can do a lot – as many people have demonstrated. But you cannot believe in yourself AND believe in God. You can say that you do. You can theoretically acknowledge his existence. You can certainly go to church and say your prayers and read your Bible.

But you cannot be a Christian, a follower of Jesus, one who acknowledges the God is really there as Lord of your life AND have self-belief. The one thing that really matters in the universe – a relationship with our creator. The one thing on which eternity hangs is not available to those who believe only in themselves. Because the very essence of the Christian message is a call to turn away from self-belief and of our need to seek mercy and forgiveness from God.

At the heart of the Christian religion, uniquely, stands a message that we are all totally incapable of doing anything to make ourselves right with God. The cross of Jesus stands in history as a broadcast to the whole world that our rebellion against God deserves death and that only someone else's death, that of Christ, is sufficient to pay.

That is the opposite of self-belief. And that is the key to life.

3 What we really need is self-understanding and transforming grace

So what shall we do? After all we've all seen the misery and heartache that can be brought about by low self-esteem and a lack of self-belief. Well I believe that there is all the difference in the world between a healthy self-understanding and an idolatrous self-belief.

Self-belief leads to unbearable arrogance or despair at failure – often alternately in the same person. Self-belief can take you to the wickedness of deceiving and manipulating others because you think you deserve success; or it can take you to the depths of despair and suicide because you think that you have the right to be master of your own life and death.

Compared to that Christian self-understanding is astonishingly liberating. It is summed up by Rico Tice, the author of the Christianity Explored course, a short introduction to the

Christian faith that we run at Christ Church,
like this:

*"You are more wicked than you ever realised
and more loved than you ever dreamed."*

That is the self-understanding of the
Christian. The Bible's perspective on humanity
is that we are valuable, each individual in
God's sight, because he made us and he loves
us. Not because of what we are in ourselves –
all our value is derived from God. He is the
source of our life and worth.

That means other people, also made by God,
are never means towards our ends, but are to
be loved, as we love ourselves.

And the message of the Christian faith is that,
through Jesus, God can transform the hearts
and minds of all who trust in him to think
rightly about God, his world and our place in
it.

We are not the masters of the universe. We
are God's dependent creatures, limited, yet
loved. Merely human, yet of infinite value in
God's sight. Self-belief might help you with
business success, plenty of sex, first class
honours and adrenaline fuelled adventures.

But it will leave you blinded about the
fundamental nature of our world, it will leave
other people as nothing more than pawns in
your game of life and, most of all, it will rob
you of the chance for belief in the God who
made you.

*Andrew Evans
February 2006*