



Hope: Living Differently

Sunday 9 February 2025

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Lamentations 3: 21–33 Romans 8: 18–28

In our scripture readings this evening the Book of Lamentations reassures us that ‘It is of the Lord’s mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning’. In his Letter to the Romans, St. Paul insists that ‘all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.’ How are we to understand and accept such assurances in light of what’s happening now around the world? Every day the internet gleefully announces new horrors being perpetrated against our world’s people, against our very planet by vested interests acting only for their own profit at the expense of humanity, present and future. Whether it’s the actions of brutal dictatorships, cynical media giants, greedy corporations, pharmaceutical companies and the military-industrial complex bent on profit at any cost, we can barely tear our attention away from the dreary parade of lives ruined, futures hijacked, ice layers melted, swathes of rainforest and seabed poisoned and rendered sterile, whole populations forced into wretched migration. If the Lord’s mercies are new every morning, then it would seem that, most days, they have been comprehensively stamped on by lunchtime.

If our scriptures are to be more than empty phrases of cheap comfort, as long-lasting and nutritious as a serving of spiritual Pot Noodle, then we have to explore what hope truly is. Along with faith and love, hope is one of the three cardinal virtues and is inseparable from them. Unlike a naive optimism that assumes things will simply get better somehow, hope is deeply realistic—it recognizes the brokenness of the world but refuses to surrender to despair. Hope, faith and love work together: Faith gives us knowledge of God’s promises, hope sustains us in trusting that those promises will be fulfilled and love is both the divine catalyst and the active human response which makes hope real in the world.

In his encyclical *Spe Salvi* Pope Benedict tells us that: “The Christian message [is] not only “informative” but “performative” [...] the Gospel is not merely a communication of things that can be known—it is one that makes things happen and is life-changing [...] The one who has hope lives differently’. Well, do we? And if so, where does that difference lie? Hope is not a passive attitude that just waits for our divine Daddy to fix everything. It doesn’t neglect present realities by diverting our minds instead to a far-off, future heaven. It’s a revolutionary energy, a shout of protest at the way things are which fuels a commitment to justice, because it trusts that the ultimate meaning of history is found not in the false promises of political demagogues or online influencers but in God’s love.

Real hope means our taking responsibility in the name of Christ for transforming the world right now, which means being willing to be confronted by its grim reality. I myself only truly learned hope when I met the need for it in the favelas of Brazil and smelled poverty on my skin and felt it in my stomach. True Christian hope doesn't settle for an unjust world, lamenting that that's just the way things are. It insists that change is possible. It believes that Christ has already overcome sin and death, therefore we can have confidence that suffering and evil never, ever have the final say.

Christian hope can't eliminate suffering, but it does transform it. As Jesus found to his cost in the Garden of Gethsemane, the Resurrection didn't erase the Cross. The cup of suffering didn't pass him by, however much he begged his Father, but the Resurrection gave and continues to give the Cross meaning. Jesus found, and we can find too, that hope is most necessary and most possible precisely in moments of despair. When injustice seems overwhelming, when suffering seems meaningless, hope insists that love is still victorious and makes that promise real. The Christian theology of hope has strong political implications. The structures of oppression constructed by every ideology embedded in naked materialism are the predominant enemies of Christian hope.

If we truly live in hope, we must actively challenge these structures rather than passively accepting them. Hope is dangerous to the status quo because it doesn't just offer placebo religious comfort – it demands change. That is why those whose power rests on dictatorship and oppressive systems have seen Christianity as a threat ever since Herod sought to kill the king of the Jews born in Bethlehem. Hope is not just an emotion or an attitude of mindfulness, self-help or positive psychology—it's participation in the very life of God. To hope is to trust that God's love is at work in the world, even when we can't see it. And that hope should move us to act, to love, and to seek justice without ceasing and without compromise.

We pray in hope, not as our gift to God but in order to become ready to receive God's gift to us. We pray not so that we can change God's mind, but that God can change our mind to become attentive, to recognise God's power at work in the world. God invites us to collaborate with the plan of salvation with all the skills and means at our disposal. Each one of us in this Chapel has been given gifts and skills to become a beacon of hope in the world, to be a transformed transformer. We pray daily to fulfil that mission so that the powers of darkness can be banished. Every time we express our hope for a better world to God, we are actively collaborating with divine grace to make it happen. But this comes with a health warning. In my experience, hope hurts. It can be hugely painful to go on praying in hope in the face of so much that would convince us to despair, but to fail would be to fall into the idolatrous delusion of thinking that it is our efforts and our power that will change the world rather than the power of the crucified and risen One, shining through our human weakness.

We act in hope in the same humble realisation that our plans and policies are as subject to failure as any other human endeavour. The grotesque injustices of our world are not generally based on the incomprehensible ill will of demonic human beings. They're the accumulation and interdependence of all our failures of solidarity, our cruelties, our greed, our desperate seeking for security and our doctoring of the truth. It's what we call the sin of the world. Every generation faces the life and death battle against sin in its own way. My mother and her generation faced it under the Nazi occupation of France and the death camps of Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen and Buchenwald. My own generation has faced it under repeated wars and dictatorships and the apparently unstoppable devastation of the planet. We can only guess what future generations will face, though the news on our television screens begins to give us depressing hints.

God invites us to engage fiercely and tirelessly in the battle against the powers of darkness outside and within. It is likely that our reward, in this world at least, will be to be crucified with Christ. But we should remember, in the very face of his own death, he assured his disciples that he had overcome the world, and even in our inarticulate groaning prayers, when we can barely find the words to ask for what we want and long for, the Spirit works within us. To live and die in faith, hope and love is to share in the life and death of Jesus. It is to share in his prayer which is the Cross and to share in the answer to that prayer, which is resurrection from all that is death-dealing. In the midst of present darkness, we are not consumed, because God's compassions fail not. They are new every morning. Great is his faithfulness.