

1. We have arrived at our third and final part in a series thinking about hope in this year's Season of Creation!

We have heard the same extract from Paul's letter to the Romans each of these last three weeks. You might say, 'well, that's quite enough of that, thanks Chris!' but at least you aren't a Carmelite monk or nun. I was reading their original Rule of Life this week and saw that they were expected to say 25 'Our Fathers' for their evening service, except on Sundays when it was upped to 50! So we might count ourselves lucky! But the reason we have heard this reading from Romans three times is that I think it speaks powerfully into this age when the earth is experiencing a human-made ecological crisis. It has much to say to us today.

We have explored two images of expectation and hope: groaning in the pains of childbirth, and standing on tiptoes in eager expectation. Today I want to explore how they might translate into concrete actions as we go about our lives. How will these images, and ideas of hope, affect how we live? What does it mean to 'live a life in hope'?

Well, not much for Oliver Burkeman who has written a book 'Four thousand weeks: Time and how to use it well.' I have been reading it these last few weeks – on loan from our very own St Johns Library. The author is making the point that our lives in fact are short in the grand scheme of things (on average, 4,000 weeks!) and talking about how to use our allotted time well. I find much of what he writes profound and helpful but in a final chapter on hope, he writes this: *'Hope is supposed to be our 'beacon in the dark'.... But in reality it is a curse. To hope for a given outcome is to place your faith in something outside yourself, and outside the current moment – the government, for example, or God, or the next generation of activists, or just 'the future' – to make things all right in the end. As the American Buddhist nun Pema Chodron says, it means relating to life as if 'there's always going to be a babysitter available when we need one.'*

2. I would like to talk with Oliver Burkeman, because on this point (I agree with so many others he makes) I think he is entirely wrong! Or he has misunderstood Christian hope!

For me, Christian hope is profound in so far as it helps us avoid two extremes in our earthly life.

On the one hand, it helps us avoid hubris and operating with Messiah complexes. It tells us yes, we can do our bit, but never let us think we can save the world single-handedly. Never let us get so arrogant to think that – there are too many examples in history of that. But on the other hand it challenges us never to just shrug our shoulders and give up hoping and trying, saying 'What's the point, I can make no difference?' It protects us from despair and lethargy. Yes, hope says, it is worth acting because you are joining in something bigger that God is doing.

Let us explore how we see these two themes coming through in our texts today.

3. First, a challenge to any sense of hubris, any sense we might be able to fix ourselves and the world around us. That comes to us through the Christian virtue of patience.

In our Old Testament reading, the prophet Micah is bemoaning the state of the world and society around him. Like other Old Testament prophets, he lived at a time of danger and transition. He saw the invasion of the northern kingdom of Israel and saw the southern kingdom threatened. He believes in a God who will save Israel in time and bring peace in its time; it is the prophet Micah who said those beautiful words (Micah 4.1-3 extracts):

'In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains..... out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.'

He shall judge between many peoples, and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more...'

But he realises he needs to learn patience. He can only play his part, do his best, but then he must learn to wait on God for this time to appear, as we read today (7.7): ***'But as for me, I will look to the Lord, I will wait for the God of my salvation; my God will hear me.'***

And Paul in his letter to the Romans has worked with this theme too. Earlier in his letter, he says to the Romans to stay the course, keep going. He encourages them, saying (5.4-5): ***'[For we know that] suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.'*** And so now he follows that up in our passage we heard again today (8.25): ***'But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.'***

So Micah and Paul show us one aspect of Christian hope: hope gives us patience to stick it out for the long haul. And that then leads us to the second aspect of hope: a hope that is active.

4. We learn a patience to enable us to carry on being active, doing those things which make for peace and healing in the world, caring for the creation. Martin Luther is reputed to have said, 'Even if I knew that Christ would return tomorrow, I would plant an apple tree today.' His point being that knowing there might be a better future to come, does not stop us working and acting towards that future today. He probably never said those words, but the point is still worthy! Perhaps what St Augustine is more reliably reputed to have said (!) is also helpful: ***'Hope has two beautiful daughters; their names are Anger and Courage. Anger at the way things are, and Courage to see that they do not remain as they are.'*** If we have a real hope in a God who cares for all creation, then we will act in tune with that hope today.

Many young people feel frustrated and angry at the way the world they feel, is moving too slowly in putting the brakes on human caused climate change. How should they respond? A good friend of ours joined together with others to form the Young Christians Climate Network, before the COP26 summit (Glasgow in 2021). Walking from Cornwall to Glasgow, they stopped on the way in various towns and cities, engaging with church groups, and encouraging people to get active in their local places by lobbying their MP. That was a way of raising the profile of the issue, and working out their anger in a positive, healthy way. I feel they are courageous people at heart, challenging the assumptions of today and calling for action and a better world.

5. So hope helps me steer a course between hubris and despair, between exhaustion and lethargy. And now it helps me reflect on the gospel reading today. Jesus asks his disciples who people say he is. And after telling him of the various names being suggested, he gets direct: 'but who do you say that I am?' Peter finally comes out with it: 'You are the Messiah!' It is the hinge point of the gospel. From now on, Jesus talks of suffering and talks of having to go to Jerusalem to confront the powers of his time and place. Peter cannot cope with the idea of suffering; Jesus cuts him off: 'If anyone would come after me, they must take up their cross.'

Jesus is saying: Yes, I have given you hope, yes, there is a profound way of living which I am showing you which will bring you life like you have never known it. But don't expect it relieves you from the suffering of this world! **In fact, it calls you to engage with the sufferings of this world. It gives you energy and courage to live life today in tune with the better tomorrow that you hope for. We cannot bring it in more quickly than God will: we must live this at the same time as waiting patiently.** The motto of this years Season of Creation is 'to hope and act with creation.' Let us pray we become people who are indeed doing that.