

Hope Amidst Bereavement

Out of the Depths ...:

I want to offer some thoughts about hope, not as an abstract, philosophical exercise (although the human capacity for hope is a fascinating topic) but in order to offer you fresh hope amidst the sadness that each of you has, in your own way, experienced. And I'll begin with a reading which is suggested for funerals and which I have occasionally used as such:

My soul is shut out from peace; I have forgotten happiness. And now I say, 'My strength is gone, that hope which came from the Lord.' Brooding on my anguish and affliction is gall and wormwood. My spirit ponders it continually and sinks within me.

This is what I shall tell my heart, and so recover hope: the favours of the Lord are not all past, his kindnesses are not exhausted; every morning they are renewed; great is his faithfulness. 'My portion is the Lord' says my soul 'and so I will hope in him.' The Lord is good to those who trust him, to the soul that searches for him. It is good to wait in silence for the Lord to save. (Lam 3.17.26)

I like that reading, which is taken from *The Book of the Lamentations of Jeremiah*, because of its honesty and its courage, but also because it puts the question of hope so succinctly. As you'll have heard, there is a change of mood, a turning-point, in the middle of the reading. Why should there be this shift? Nothing has changed externally. The situation is just as awful as it was two verses earlier. And yet ... somehow light dawns. Humanists would say that this is simply the expression of a survival instinct or of the life-force or of accommodation to the new situation. People with religious faith want to say that there is something more going on.

It's worth putting this reading in context. *The Book of Lamentations* is a series of five poems composed after the destruction of Jerusalem in 587BC, most of them 'acrostics', beginning each line with one of the 22 letters of the alphabet, taken in order. More importantly, it is possible that they were written as some sort of liturgy. The group (perhaps priests of the temple, perhaps some sort of synagogue) gathered to tell quite how bad it was – and, by entering into the sorrow in their prayer, to be lifted out of it. If you know Psalm 130, the *De Profundis*, you already know the form. Its movement takes us from:

"Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord, Lord, hear my voice!" by way of *"My soul is waiting for the Lord, I count on his word,"* to the promise of the last lines, *"Because with the Lord there is mercy and fullness of redemption, Israel indeed he will redeem from all its iniquity."*

***De Profundis* – Suffering Love:**

That ancient poem is the journey we are on, the journey in search of hope – and I commend it to you for your reflection, together with that passage from Lamentations already quoted. And *De Profundis* is the title given by Oscar Wilde to his 1897 letter from prison to Lord Alfred Douglas, his erstwhile lover, in which he reflects on his own fall from grace and re-evaluates his whole life and system of beliefs.

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Reading it, I couldn't help thinking how well it summed up the experience of bereavement (for all that his shamed and imprisoned circumstance is so different from your own) – and noticing how Wilde finds himself, almost involuntarily, making the same journey towards hope that the ancient bard undertook. First, hear his account of the pain of loss:

. . . Suffering is one very long moment. We cannot divide it by seasons. We can only record its moods, and chronicle their return. With us time itself does not progress. It revolves. It seems to circle round one centre of pain ... Of seed-time or harvest, of the reapers bending over the corn, or the grape gatherers threading through the vines, of the grass in the orchard made white with broken blossoms or strewn with fallen fruit: of these we know nothing and can know nothing. For us there is only one season, the season of sorrow. The very sun and moon seem taken from us . . .

Isn't that how it feels, even as the gaps between really dark days gradually lengthen? There is a boring, stultifying aspect to sorrow, a great repetitiveness, the heaviness of the daily round unleavened by delight.

But Wilde moves swiftly beyond this heaviness, offering the same image with which I started this day: *Where there is sorrow there is holy ground. Some day people will realise what that means. They will know nothing of life till they do*, and here Wilde dares to believe that there might be meaning within his sadness, making a discovery which I would scarcely dare to point to, something which can only be learnt validly by the one who suffers, and yet something I believe to be true. *Now I find hidden somewhere away in my nature something that tells me that nothing in the whole world is meaningless, and suffering least of all. That something hidden away in my nature, like a treasure in a field, is Humility.* He speaks of a receiving a new life and moves from feeling suicidal to the desire to live on so that he might explore what all this might mean: *One cannot acquire [such a new life], except by surrendering everything that one has. It is only when one has lost all things, that one knows that one possesses it. ... Sorrow, then, and all that it teaches one, is my new world.*

And, oddly, it is his very suffering which is for him a revelation: *One discerns things one never discerned before. One approaches the whole of history from a different standpoint ... Now it seems to me that love of some kind is the only possible explanation of the extraordinary amount of suffering that there is in the world. I cannot conceive of any other explanation. I am convinced that there is no other, and that if the world has indeed, as I have said, been built of sorrow, it has been built by the hands of love, because in no other way could the soul of man, for whom the world was made, reach the full stature of its perfection. Pleasure for the beautiful body, but pain for the beautiful soul.* Make of that what you will, but it is certainly the case that if you did not love, you would not feel the true pain of bereavement.

Finally broken by hearing that he has lost legal rights over his children, Oscar Wilde arrives at a moment of conversion: *I saw then that the only thing for me was to accept everything so that while for the first year of my imprisonment I did nothing else, and can remember doing nothing else, but wring my hands in impotent despair, and say, 'What an ending, what an appalling ending!' now I try to say to myself, and sometimes when I am not torturing myself do really and sincerely say, 'What a beginning, what a wonderful beginning!' ... while to propose to be a better man is a piece of unscientific cant, to have become a deeper man is the privilege of those who have suffered. And such I think I have become.* I don't anticipate

that anyone here will cry out, “What a wonderful beginning!” Bereavement is, inevitably, a sense of an ending; but perhaps you might find in it a deepening, also.

For all the rights that society has taken from him, Wilde is certain that one right remains his: *I have a right to share in sorrow, and he who can look at the loveliness of the world and share its sorrow, and realise something of the wonder of both, is in immediate contact with divine things, and has got as near to God's secret as any one can get.* Finally, social outcast though he has become, he dares to believe, that *Nature, whose sweet rains fall on unjust and just alike, ... will cleanse me in great waters, and with bitter herbs make me whole.* As I said this morning, sorrow is, for the moment, the shape of love. But when that sorrow assumes the shape of compassion and communion, the love that is stronger than death, then I think we can dare to say that we have come close to God – or God has come close to us.

Hope and the Human Spirit:

There is much that is very ‘Victorian’ about Wilde’s book – not just his florid prose but also his ‘aestheticism’, his particular form of artistic individualism, glorying in his own wit, the over-confidence that led to his downfall. Yet, as well as his (if you like) theological insights into the value of brokenness and suffering, his text is a tremendous testimony to the strength of the human spirit. Whether you are Europhile or Europhobe, we have in the Europe Community an extraordinary testament to the power of hope, since at least its first stages were planned by people who had both witnessed and survived the worst of which our humanity is capable, some of them in concentration camps. For all that the dream has gone so tragically wrong in the history and the mind-set of that nation, the same can be said of the State of Israel.

To be human is to hope. It is one of the most characteristic of human attributes. It does not make sense to say that a pet cat or dog has hope, though it may know despair. It has a capacity for longing, certainly, for food, for warmth, for sexual encounter (assuming we didn’t have the good sense to have it neutered). A dog may wait patiently for the return of its owner (I think a cat is more likely to dismiss such thoughts). But the longing is not for change, for newness, for new possibilities beyond the horizons of canine or feline imagination. What it seeks is only the return of the familiar, safety and the fulfilment of its needs. By contrast, we recognise lack of hope in human beings as an illness, depression. Hope *is* the life-force in us, although we can invest that hope in many different things, some more worthy than others. God, celebrity (our own or others’), the national lottery, a relationship, a football team, the nation, our possessions, shopping – these are all things in which we can place our hope. But most of those will disappoint, and the Christian would say that only God is big enough and reliable enough not to delude us.

The Loss of A Shared Narrative of Hope:

You are probably familiar with Woody Allen’s joke about his own mortality: *“I’m not afraid of dying. I just don’t want to be there when it happens.”* The joke, of course, is that this is the prevailing attitude to the experience of dying in our culture today. Generally speaking, people don’t seek a ‘good death’, as earlier Christians idealised it, with everything in life resolved, the priest sent for and the community gathered in prayer around the bed (whether or not they lived up to the ideal when the moment came!). More commonly it is firstly the postponement and then the anaesthetising of death that is sought (and I don’t say that in any critical way – thank God for pain control!). But it is worth noting that we seem to live with is

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the reversal of one of the sayings of St. Paul to the Corinthians. He wrote: *“If our hope in Christ has been for this life only, we are of all people the most pitiable.”* (1 Cor 15.19) But, in practice, for many people in the UK today the saying has been reversed: *“If our hope had been for the next life only, then we would be of all people the most pitiable.”* Hope does not extend (or, at least, does not get thought through) to anywhere beyond direct experience.

In fact, when faced with death – which, by its very finality, puts in question everything that we hope for – we have a further difficulty in contemporary Britain. There is no agreement about what it is that we might hope for or what we are actually doing at a funeral. That’s just what you would expect in our ‘Post-Modern’ society; it’s what philosophers would call the lack of a ‘Meta-Narrative’ (in other words, a shared overarching account of our deepest beliefs and hopes to which all community-members subscribe and into which we fit all our experiences). Strangely, it is the very-far-from-post-modern Victorian graveyard which is one of the roots of this shift. Following cholera epidemics in the 1840s, the ancient churchyards attached to ancient parish churches in towns were closed and replaced with new municipal cemeteries on the outskirts, away from public life.

That change meant that the official interpretation of death was no longer the exclusive preserve of the Church of England. In fact it was the local council who became the custodians of death. From 1880, non-conformist ministers were allowed to take services even in rural churchyards, while the first crematorium opened in Brookwood in 1878, attracting first of all ‘free-thinkers’ and those wishing to make a statement against the traditional Christian doctrine of the Resurrection of the Dead, but gradually becoming widely used, as another ‘neutral space’ within which to come to terms with death. The cumulative effect was to make the interpretation of death the task of the individual. Crematorium chapels, in particular, are – as you may have observed – deliberately anodyne, with architecture that merely hints at the ecclesiastical, and with candles and crucifixes all removable, placed according to the staff’s understanding of the probable sensibilities of the deceased and the mourners. There are no universally shared rituals of death in this country, neither the Muslim burial by the following Sundown nor the Irish Wake. Death means what we choose it to mean, and many funerals literally have a sound-track to communicate the interpretation made; not one built around communal singing about shared beliefs but a sort of ‘Greatest Hits’ or ‘This Is Your Life’ album, celebrating what was idiosyncratic rather than what was held in common, using the sounds of the party moments to remain deliberately (and rather artificially) upbeat.

And yet, I suggest, even the most inadequate or despairing funeral is, in some sense, a statement of hope. A funeral says: this life mattered. It was memorable, worth grieving. It had meaning. This person’s life was a journey. This death leaves a gap. The dying was a departure, a leave-taking. The journey continues – for us who remain, certainly; but also perhaps for the one who has ‘left us’. So the question I want to pursue is this: How can Christian faith fill out that common human experience of hope in the face of death?

Christian Death and Christian Hope:

What ought to mark out Christians from all others is simply the one word, *Easter*. What invites us to look at the grave with anything other than a despairing sense of loss isn’t optimism in our powers of immortality, nor wish-fulfilment. It is the simple message contained in Lk 24.34, the apostles’ reply to the account given by the two disciples on the road to Emmaus on that first Easter Day: *“The Lord has indeed risen, and has appeared to*

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Simon.” The most obviously crushed and wilfully obliterated life, that of the truly just one ended not in defeat but in being raised up. Christian faith is the living out of that message, the drawing of the consequences of this encounter.

It is notable that the second encyclical of this current Pope, after his initial letter on love and its origins in God (*Deus Caritas Est*) was on hope, *Spe Salvi* (= “In Hope We Are Saved”). In a world in which ‘big hope’ has in many ways been traded in for lots of ‘little hopes’, he sets out to put hope at the centre of faith. The first point he makes is that for Christians, faith and hope often mean the same thing. He points out that the First Letter of Peter tells believers, not to explain their *beliefs*, but to “*always have your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope you have.*” (3.15) Similarly, the Letter to the Ephesians reminds his hearers that before they came to Christian faith they were “without hope and without God in the world.” (2.12) And 1 Thess 4.13 tells a grieving community not “*to grieve as others who have no hope.*”

The Pope’s point is this: that Christian faith is not about knowing a certain number of facts that others don’t have access to. Rather, it changes our way of looking at the world – and our way of looking at ourselves. Of course, we remain all-too-conscious of our own mortality, yet the deepest truth about our humanity, according to Christian faith, is this: that the tomb is empty or, if you prefer, that the light of Easter Dawn overpowers the darkness of Good Friday. Fear of annihilation no longer governs our take on reality. In the same way, it is the love of God which rules the universe, not either the laws of physics and evolution nor blind fate. Yet this cannot be ‘proved’ by formal logic. It has to be entered into, by faith. Pope Benedict points to the statement of Heb 11.1: “*Only faith can guarantee the blessings that we hope for, or prove the existence of realities that are unseen.*”

It is faith which allows us to experience already the promised future, eternal life, and which opens up a new foundation for living. However, he argues, our modern society has all too often replaced Christian faith in God by ‘faith in progress’, forgetting the limitations of our human nature and our capacity for evil. And ‘progress’, as we all know, has nothing to say about the death of a loved one. It doesn’t, in the end, help at all. The Pope concludes: “*Let us put it very simply: man needs God; otherwise he remains without hope.*” (n.23) And the choice for God has to be renewed again and again, in each person, in each situation, in each age. “*It is not science that redeems man: man is redeemed by love*” (n.26), but only divine love is great enough to actually free us, and that love is about relationship. Pope Benedict continues: “*This is what it means to say: Jesus Christ has ‘redeemed’ us. Through him we have become certain of God.*” So only (n.27) “*If we are in relation with him who does not die, who is Life itself and Love itself, then we are in life. Then we ‘live’.*”

The conclusion to Pope Benedict’s long and (it must be said) sometimes convoluted argument is this, and it’s worth quoting at length: “*Let us say once again: we need the greater and lesser hopes that keep us going day by day. But these are not enough without the great hope, which must surpass everything else. The great hope can only be God, who encompasses the whole of reality and who can bestow upon us what we, by ourselves, cannot attain. The fact that it comes as a gift is actually part of hope. God is the foundation of hope: not any god, but the God who has a human face and who has loved us to the end, each one of us and humanity in its entirety. His Kingdom is not an imaginary hereafter, situated in a future that will never arrive; his Kingdom is present wherever he is loved and wherever his love reaches us. His love alone gives us the possibility of soberly persevering day by day, without ceasing to be spurred on by hope, in a world which by its very nature is imperfect.*”

His love is at the same time our guarantee of the existence of what we only vaguely sense and which, nevertheless, in our deepest self, we await: a life that is 'truly' life." (n.31)

'Practising' Hope:

That hope has to be cultivated, worked on, built up – and Pope Benedict advocates three 'settings' for learning and practising hope: prayer, action and suffering, and judgement. His statement about the role of prayer is rather beautiful and, I guess any bereaved person will recognise the truth of it: *"When no one listens to me any more, God still listens to me. When I can no longer talk to anyone or call upon anyone, I can always talk to God. When there is no longer anyone to help me deal with a need or expectation that goes beyond the human capacity for hope, he can help me. When I have been plunged into complete solitude ... if I pray I am never totally alone."* (n.32) Prayer purifies our desires and creates space for real hope.

Secondly, says the Pope, all serious and upright human conduct is 'hope in action' – yet we have to let our own hopes and plans be illuminated and changed by a hope that is bigger than simply 'what I want to do today', a larger vision which is rooted in the certainty of God's love, or our energies will gradually be dissipated and all our activities themselves end up hope-less. On the other hand, if we have real hope, then our efforts and our courage will constantly be renewed.

Alongside this active engagement, the Pope places the 'passive' reality of undergoing suffering – which we can never eliminate. Indeed, he points out that sufferings of the innocent and psychological pain both seem to have increased in recent decades. Only a God who personally enters history, as God has in fact done in Christ, can tackle the deeper evils that trouble our existence, what he calls *'the sin of the world'*. And this leads him to draw out a truth which is well-established in the Christian Tradition but increasingly difficult for us to 'hear' in our day: *"It is not by sidestepping or fleeing from suffering that we are healed, but rather by our capacity for accepting it, maturing through it and finding meaning through union with Christ, who suffered with infinite love."* (n.37)

It is our capacity to accept the suffering of others and to bear it with them by com-*passion* which is the measure of a society. But that requires of us that we also enter into *"a path of purification and growth in maturity, a journey of hope."* When suffering is shared then it is penetrated by the light of love, which is the meaning of the Latin word, *con-solation*. But this requires a self-renunciation, a new vulnerability – and only true hope can give us the strength to achieve that. The Pope commends the old tradition of 'offering up' little trials and self-renunciations as precisely the sort of thing which can train us in this capacity for hope-filled love: *"In this way, even the small inconveniences of daily life could acquire meaning and contribute to the economy of good and of human love."* (n.40)

Finally, Pope Benedict turns to another old Christian theme now often neglected, that of the Last Judgement, which gave earlier generations a sense of their responsibility for their lives. He does not advocate looking at those frightening medieval 'Doom' paintings, replete with devils with pitchforks, for inspiration, but contemplating the crucified Christ: *"God now*

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reveals his true face in the figure of the sufferer who shares man's Godforsaken condition by taking it upon himself. This innocent sufferer has attained the certitude of hope: there is a God, and God can create justice in a way that we cannot conceive, yet we can begin to grasp it through faith." (n.43) The doctrine of the Last Judgement, rather than being a threat, is a promise that the suffering of the world will be undone, healed, raised up into glory. And, the Pope suggests, it is in the encounter of the one who has died with Christ that all that is impure and corrupt is burned away, simply by the power of Christ's love. That is what 'purgatory' means, not some fiery place of detention but the vision of true love overwhelming all unlove: "*The pain of love becomes our salvation and our joy,*" as we are drawn into full communion with God in the Body of Christ. (n.47) In our prayer for the deceased we express our continued communion with them and love for them, entrusting them to God's grace. And it is Mary, above all, who is a light of hope, *stella maris*, the star of the sea, on our journey.

Conclusion:

From all these various reflections, I hope that some elements have been useful. I suppose that the things that might be useful to focus on might begin with that progression from acknowledging pain to finding hope which you can see in *Psalms 130* and (in secular mode) in Wilde's letter. Can I, like its author, find hope in the midst of brokenness and the breaking of all my plans? More generally, where do I find hope, those 'little hopes' that get me out of bed in the morning – my plans and expectations – and the 'greater hope' which is somehow something to do with my relationship with God? How, for instance, do I get through a bad day? And how can we help each other to live hope-fully? Thirdly, is ours a hope-filled society, or is hope in short supply? Do we share each other's hopes or is hope something essentially private and hidden today? Fourthly, do I draw hope from the Gospel or from the image of Christ Risen? How does that message change my way of looking at my loss, my neighbours or myself? Finally, what do you make of the notion that we need to 'practise' hope, stretching our capacity for it through prayer, through positive action and the passive acceptance of suffering? But really, talk, be silent, walk and pray entirely as you wish.