

Hope and hard work

Readings: Romans 5:1 – 11, John 4:27 - 42

Hope – faith, hope and love abide. The greatest of these is love” argues St Paul. Of course he is right. On the ground though, each of these characteristics enrich and enable the other two so much that it is difficult to distinguish between them.

In an inspiring video posted on his group's website, Matt Willingham of Preemptive Love can be seen walking through the ruins of a church in Mosul bombed by IS.

He walks us through the Orthodox Church in central Mosul describing the destruction as he goes. And it’s awful. Everything apart from a few pillars, seems destroyed. A huge crater, possibly caused by a mortar blast, can be seen where the altar used to be.

In the midst the piles of rubble, Waleed, a Muslim member of Willingham's team, noticed something extraordinary. He called Matt over and he said, "Hey, come look at this. And he pointed up, and we looked up and got to see this."

The camera then focuses on the ceiling where a beautiful image of Jesus can be seen, miraculously undamaged.

On his blog, Willingham says he stood silently and wept when he saw the image.

"It was just one of those moments where despite all that's around us, all the negativity and destruction. That little moment just caught my breath. Just this beautiful little glimpse of Christ, of hope.. it just keeps you going," Willingham says.

The reality is that most of life is hard work. Bishop Justin focused on this during Convergence and yet his talks were inspiring and full of hope. Life is hard and we all need glimpses of hope, glimpses of Jesus, to keep us going.

Hard work is doable if we have hope that it is all worthwhile.

We all need hope. At the same time we need to work hard towards realising our hopes. Jacob Klootwyk says “Have faith and plant cabbages.”

The gospel story gives me great hope. The Samaritan woman is a loser in the eyes of so many but not in Jesus’ eyes. She has lived with several men and none have brought her happiness. Then she meets another guy.

But this guy is different – chalk and cheese to anyone she has ever met before in her entire life! He treats her like an intelligent human being. She can see a glimpse of hope for a different way of living.

The story doesn’t tell us her immediate reaction to this man’s assertion that he is the Messiah. Pretty soon afterwards though, she heads back to her village to tell the folk about this man.

“Come and see a man who told me everything I ever did! Could he possibly be the Messiah?”

A couple of reflections about this brief encounter:

- The man Jesus brought the woman hope that things could be different
- That woman is not very clear about who the man Jesus is
- She didn't let her lack of experience or understanding hold her back in telling her friends
- She didn't worry about getting everything right
- She had been given hope and she shared as much as she knew in order to give hope to others

The Bible has a lot to say about hope. Biblical hope is founded in faith in God.

Think for a moment about how we use the word 'hope' in English. We say things like "I hope it will work out alright." Actually what we mean is that we are not sure.

But the Bible doesn't talk about hope that way. Both the Hebrew word (*batah*) and the Greek word (*elpis/elpizo*) used for hope do not indicate doubt but rather certainty. So biblical hope is a confident expectation based on a solid foundation.

Hebrews 11:1:

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.

It's not that the Bible doesn't allow for doubt and questioning. It does. There are plenty of examples of people asking hard questions in the Bible. The book of Job and several of the Psalms are prime examples of doubt.

However hope, as described in the Bible, carries the confidence that comes with knowing for sure, without question, what we have been promised by God in His Word.

And it is founded on the solid Rock, our Lord Jesus Christ. Everything the heroes of faith did, as recorded in Hebrews 11, was made possible because they had this hope in who God is. They've seen God act and they've heard God's words so they know God always keeps promises made.

So hope, like love, is a reality – not a feeling. And that reality is worth basing our lives on.

Choosing hope can be hard work. It can take constant effort. Who said "I am filled with the Spirit but I leak"? Some of the hard work in maintaining hope involves spiritual discipline, choosing the voices we listen to, ensuring we read God's word. It can be very hard work to maintain our hope especially if we are feeling down or are unwell or in the midst of a whole bunch of crap.

The amazing Baptist preacher D L Moody was asked why he urged Christians to be filled constantly with the Holy Spirit. "I need a continual infilling because I leak!"

Apparently he pointed to a water tank which had sprung a leak and said "I'm like that!"

Hope needs a disciplined focus on Christ to be maintained, especially if you are a natural pessimist.

Paul understood this. If anyone had a right to be discouraged and full of doubt it was him. I reckon I'd have given up long ago if I went through half of what he did.

But Paul was focused on Christ, and the mission he gave to expand God's Kingdom, from the moment of his conversion; rather from when Ananias explained to him what had happened. He also knew his Bible and the characters of the First Testament very well.

Last week Jean spoke on Chapter 4 of Romans which describes Abraham becoming part of God's family and that all Christians are part of that same family. The week before, I covered the contrasts between the first and second Adam, in the second half of chapter 5.

Let's look at the beginning of that chapter now:

Therefore, since we have been made right in God's sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us. Because of our faith, Christ has brought us into this place of undeserved privilege where we now stand, and we confidently and joyfully look forward to sharing God's glory. vv 1 & 2

So we have hope. We have peace. And we have grace. My version describes it as 'this place of undeserved privilege where we now stand.' That in itself is absolutely amazing. Thank you Lord!

Not only do we have all that but we also have hope; hope that in the future we will share God's glory. And remember that Biblical hope is based on what Christ has done. So it's definite that we will share God's glory. It's not a maybe.

Colossians 1:27 tells us that it is Christ within us who actually is the hope of glory.

So we'll share God's glory - what does that mean? We participate in the very nature of God. We enjoy such intimacy that God's nature is within us and flows from us. We reflect the glory of God to those around us. We get to be part of what God is doing in this world.

That is sharing his glory. And we put our hope in that happening because it will happen. The only trouble is that this is where hard work comes in.

Belonging to Jesus and sharing in his glory, means we will run into problems – just as he did. And Paul tells us we can rejoice in those difficulties.

They develop endurance in us; steadfastness some versions say. That endurance/steadfastness is a necessary trait to have if we want to work with God in extending the Kingdom.

Paul goes on: endurance develops strength of character. God doesn't seem to get how things should be! What we really want is to have strength implanted in us miraculously. We don't want to have to work at it. But the inherent meaning in strength of character is that it has been 'proven by trial'.¹

Character comes from endurance and strengthens our hope of salvation. So hope too, is not often implanted supernaturally. It grows as part of a process – a process that involves our hard work; the hard work of maintaining our 'faith in times of severe testing'.²

Endurance produces character which strengthens our hope of salvation.

And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love. v5

Remember Biblical hope is a sure thing. We have the hope of salvation which has come to pass, and is coming to pass and will come to pass.

The rest of our reading describes how salvation comes. We know it comes through Christ. On the first Sunday in Lent we read Paul's contrast of the first Adam and the second Adam who is Jesus. In this passage he compares Christ with all of us. Very few people would die for another. There are heroes though – people who would die for someone else. Usually the person they would die for is a family member, or someone who is very worthy. Jesus died for us when we were not worthy and never could be, no matter how hard we tried.

And because Jesus died, we are right with God. This is the message of Easter. It is the message of Lent. We are right with God – we have the sure and certain hope that our relationship with the Lord God of Hosts, the one who stooped so low for us, that relationship is good.

And we have the sure and certain hope that in the midst of the crap that sometimes surrounds us, we are being made into his likeness. We are reflecting his glory even now and we will reflect it more as we do the hard work, with him, of life.

But salvation involves so much more than an individual's relationship with Christ. Salvation is about restoring God's Kingdom over all of creation. We do that through our prayers and our actions.

Each time we can be bothered to send off a letter advocating for positive change, each time we look up and smile at a neighbour, each time we buy a

¹ New American Commentary on Romans, Robert H Mounce, 135

² Ibid 135

fair-trade product or take the trouble to leave the car at home, we are playing our part in seeing God's kingdom come, now and into the future.³

As we pray and live out transformed lives, others will see that glory and be drawn to him too.

Tom Wright reminds us that:

'When we are reconciled to the God who is our Father, we discover that he wants not simply to enjoy this one-to-one relationship, but to enlist us in his service in working for his Kingdom. And that will bring all kinds of pressures and problems which require us to hang on in faith and hope even when we don't sense his presence, even when it doesn't feel as if there is anything happening.'⁴

When we keep our focus on him and on those around us, we will forget ourselves a bit more. The Samaritan woman was completely unselfconscious as she ran to tell her neighbours about this wonderful man she had met.

She didn't care whether she would explain everything accurately. She just wanted to introduce him.

She hoped like crazy that the villagers too would be impressed and want to spend some time with him.

And they did.

For her, at that point in time, telling others wasn't hard work. She was smitten and it overflowed.

I'm sure as time went on, and she faced obstacles and rejection from some, her witnessing became more like hard work. We don't know what kind of on-going success she did or didn't have.

We don't even know whether or not she maintained her own hope in Jesus. It's likely she did, given the contrast she saw in Jesus to all the other men she had met. I like to think she went on for the Lord regardless of any difficulties she faced.

I like to think those difficulties produced endurance and strength of character and even more hope of salvation.

What about us?

Will we endure the trials we face and keep our own hope alive? Will we look up and catch a glimpse of Jesus, who is with us always, trusting and hoping in him? Will we share that hope with those around us, even if we don't have the right words or the whole picture?

³ 'L' is for lifestyle, Ruth Valerio, 175-176

⁴ Paul for Everyone, Romans, Tom Wright 82

Blessing:

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope. Romans 15:13

Prayer

Heavenly father, I am your humble servant,

I come before you today in need of hope.

There are times when I feel helpless,

There are times when I feel weak.

I pray for hope.

I need hope for a better future.

I need hope for a better life.

I need hope for love and kindness.

Some say that the sky is at it's
darkest just before the light.

I pray that this is true, for all seems dark.

I need your light, Lord, in every way.

I pray to be filled with your light from
head to toe; to bask in your glory;
to know that all is right in the world,
as you have planned, and as you want
it to be.

Help me to walk in your light, and

live my life in faith and glory.

In your name I pray, Amen.⁵

Reflection questions:

Problems and trials help us develop endurance. What difficulties can you identify that have helped you in this way?

“Our friendship with God was restored by the death of his Son.” In what ways is your friendship with God displayed?

The woman ran to tell her village about Jesus, even though she didn't grasp everything about him. Does sharing the Good News bring you hope or does it feel like hard work? In what ways?

In what ways does hope blossom in the midst of hard work?

⁵ Check out <http://www.catholic.org/prayers/prayer.php?p=2986> for the video as well as the written prayer.