

People of Hope

Readings Psalm 71:1-18, 1 Peter 1:3-9, Luke 17: 20-21

Introduction

A couple of years ago (April 20th 2013) I happened to catch a National Radio programme in which Kim Hill was interviewing a well-known Christian apologist, Professor John Lennox of Oxford University. They were talking about the problem of suffering. John Lennox admitted this is often a difficult issue for Christians. But; he said, atheists had no 'answer' to suffering either. However, he added, Christianity can offer hope. Christianity can offer hope.

Hope is one of the things that should characterize us as Christians. Our sentence for today says:

"Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect." 1 Peter 3:15

So today I want to explore what that hope is and what it is based on.

First, let's pray. Lord, may your Word be the yardstick we use when we look at what we believe and do. As we study your Word today, help us to hear what you are saying to us about what it means to be a people of hope, called to bring hope to the world around us. Amen.

What is hope?

I wonder how many of you said to yourselves: "I hope it will be warmer in church this week than it was last week." If you did, you were looking forward to something, and that is what hope is about – looking forward to a future good. But hope is more than a general optimism – you know the typical Kiwi 'she'll be right' attitude. Not that there is anything wrong, necessarily in being optimistic, but that isn't hope.

Nor is it wishful thinking: I hope I win the lottery; I hope it won't rain for my daughter's wedding in September.

So let's turn to our Bible readings and see what we can learn from them about hope and what it means for us to be a people of hope.

The God of Hope

Let's look at **Psalm 71**. Read 71:1-5

"In you, Lord, I have taken refuge" (v1) ... "Deliver me, my God," (v4) ... "For you have been my hope, Sovereign God, my confidence since my youth." (v5).

The Psalmist says he is putting his hope in? – God.

We are a people of hope because we have confidence in God and God is a God of hope. He is a God who has created a world in which hope is possible. How many of you have seen the AA Insurance ad – first of all it shows what it would be like to live in a world where things couldn't get fixed, a broken umbrella, a scraped knee, a lovers tiff, among other things. But thank God we do not live in a world like that: things that are broken can be repaired; wounds do heal up; relationships can be mended. We can have hope that things can get better because God has created a world where this is possible. His world reflects his character, and he is a God of hope, a God who can put things right. In Psalm 71 the psalmist is looking to God to put things right in his situation.

Christian hope: 1 Peter 1:3-9

For us, as Christians, our hope is also based on our belief and trust in God, and in his loving purposes for humanity. In the NT hope is often linked with faith. In his letter to the Christians in Corinth Paul writes: "Now these three remain: faith hope and love." 1 Corinthians 13:13. What we don't see in the English is the fact that the verb 'remain' is singular. In other words these three things are so closely connected to one another that Paul treats them as one thing. Aquinas picks up on this and says: "Faith begets hope and hope begets charity" ('love in action'). We will see how important that is a bit later on.

Now let's look more closely at our second reading 1 Peter 1:3-9. Peter's letter was written to the small groups of Christians scattered throughout the area we now call Turkey. They were very much in the minority in the society they lived in and were undergoing increasing persecution – they were being bad-mouthed and insulted (3:9); there was malicious talk against the way they behaved as Christians (3:16). Peter is writing to these small groups of Christians to encourage them to stand fast in their faith, so he reminds them of their hope, what lies ahead for them.

V3 It all begins with God, with God and his mercy - he is the source of our hope and our hope is based on what he has done for us.

He has given us new birth – we are reborn into a living hope. "New birth" is one of the ways the Bible describes what happens when we become a Christian, when we become God's children. John says we have passed from death to life (1 John 3:14), eternal life. Paul says anyone who is in Christ is a new creation. The old creation – what is all around us – is going to pass away, but those of us who are followers of Jesus are already part of the new creation that will replace it.

So, **we are reborn into a living hope**. Paul, in his letter to the Christians in Ephesus, says that before they became Christians they were like the people around them – “without hope and without God in the world.” (Ephesians 2:12) People today are far less hopeful about the future. We can see that by the way so many live only for the present - the busyness of the workaholic; mindless drinking binges; the desire for the latest item of technology; the ‘bucket-list’ approach to life – having to cram everything in before death intervenes.

In contrast, listen to what one commentator has to say about the ‘living hope.’

“In the present turbulent world, Christians are truly justified in viewing the future with optimism. Our new God-given life has delivered us from hopelessness and given us a joyous expectancy of what God still has in store for His people.”

Please hear what I am saying here and what I am not saying. I am definitely not saying that once you become a Christian all your troubles go away and life is sweet from then on. No, the very fact that Peter is having to write this letter to Christians facing all sorts of difficulties and ordeals tells us that that is not what it is all about.

What I am saying is that hope in a future deliverance can help us face some very dark days in the present. I am thinking about the Coptic Christians martyred for their faith by Islamic extremists. Do you remember the image that circulated soon after that? It showed their crowns coming down from heaven and Jesus waiting to receive them. Does that mean life is easy for their families who are left behind? No, but like Peter’s letter it offers them hope and encouragement to persevere.

Peter also says that **this living hope comes through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead**. In his very first sermon on the day of Pentecost Peter said to the crowd:

“God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it. Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear. ... God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.” Acts 2:32-33, 36.

Paul, also writes to the Christians in Corinth: “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep [died] in Christ are lost.” 1 Corinthians 15:17-18.

It all hangs on this, this is what our hope is based on, what God has already done for us in Christ.

Christ’s resurrection and ascension not only means that right here and now we can know that our sins have been forgiven and that we can

receive God's gift of the Holy Spirit to help us live day by day in obedience to Jesus, as he says in v2, but also that we too can be assured of our own resurrection – and what Peter describes as “our inheritance.”

Then we have been given or are born into an Inheritance – what does that mean? In the OT it referred to the land portioned out to the twelve tribes of Israel, but in the NT it is used of inheriting the kingdom:

In the parable of the sheep and the goats Jesus says: “Then the King will say to those on his right, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you took me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was ill and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.” Matthew 25:34-36.

The writer of Hebrews also tell his readers that they are “receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken,” Hebrews 12:12. And the words Peter uses to describe the kingdom show how different it is to earthly kingdoms. It is indestructible – free from death and decay; incorruptible – free from moral impurity; unfading – free from the ravages of time. How different from the Roman empire of the time and all empires since then including the present ‘empire’ if you want to call it such of western secular materialism. Nothing lasts.

But this inheritance does. It is kept or reserved in heaven for you. So what we are looking at here is **a future inheritance that is secure**, that we can be sure of.

Just as our inheritance is kept safe, so are we – “through faith we are shielded by God's power.” God protects his people as they wait to come into their inheritance but what is required of them is that they stay faithful, despite all the grief and trials referred to in v6, ordeals which are really going to test their faith to prove whether it is real or not. But the outcome is worth it – “the salvation of your souls.” Again it is important to notice what Peter is saying here and what he is not. He is probably using the Greek word *psyche* which is translated as ‘soul’ so that his readers don't get the idea that they are going to be saved from any physical suffering or death – they are not. But he is not talking about the soul as distinct from the body. The idea that your body may die but your soul, freed from the body, lives on is a Greek idea derived from Plato; it is not

a Jewish or Christian belief. *Psyche* is really your whole life or self-identity rather than some disembodied soul.

This salvation is ready to be revealed in the last time or on the last day when Jesus returns. Recently I was at a meeting about eschatology – the last times – and the person leading it asked when had we last heard a sermon or even a mention of this sort of thing in our respective churches. Some of those present couldn't remember when, if ever, they had heard these things talked about, but those of us who were Anglicans were able to say "Yes, we do, every week when we say the Creed: 'We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.'" And of course during Advent we are not only looking at Jesus' first coming which we celebrate at Christmas, but also looking forward to his second coming, which is what Peter is referring to here.

It's what John is talking about in Revelation too. Some people avoid reading Revelation because of all the weird imagery but they miss a lot. John's visions are an uncovering or revealing of what is really going on. The reality of the risen and ascended Christ, seated on the throne – the king of the kingdom – receiving the worship of heaven; the king who is going to come again to judge the living and the dead. **This is our hope.** Judgement, yes, God's final righting of all wrongs, all injustices but then the final chapter in the story – the new heaven and earth and the uniting of heaven and earth or as John sees in his vision – the Holy City coming down from heaven to earth. God finally dwelling with his people on earth the wiping away of every tear; no more death, mourning crying or pain. What a future – go home and read about it in Revelation 21 and 22. And we are going to be there – in our resurrected bodies, partaking of what Tom Wright describes as life after life after death. **This is our hope.**

Just what a difference this makes was borne in on me a year or so ago when I went to the funeral of someone who had been in the same youth group as my daughter. She had been a vibrant and colourful person and an inspiring teacher. Her students formed the bulk of the congregation; many were distraught. For them death was the end. Afterwards they gathered outside in almost total silence and the spirit of heaviness and despair was oppressive and almost palpable. They had no hope.

But some might say all this is pie in the sky when you die stuff, what about the here and now? Many Christian writers have recognized the danger of being so religious, so otherworldly focused that we neglect things like the struggle for justice or the removal of poverty. Tom Wright tackles this in his book *Surprised by Hope* and I would suggest you get

hold of a copy if you want to read more about it. But I want to come at it from a different angle. Let's look at our final Bible reading Luke 17:20-21.

Remember Peter talked about our future hope as an inheritance and we linked that up with what Jesus said about inheriting or entering into the kingdom. The Jews of Jesus' time, as you know, were looking for God to intervene, to raise up a king who would kick out the Romans and set up his own kingdom here on earth. So they ask Jesus when that would be. Jesus replies: "the kingdom of God is in your midst."

What did he mean by this? That if they would only look around and see the things that he was doing: miracles of healing, welcoming the outcasts, making people whole, then they would see that God's rule, his kingdom, has broken in. When Jesus returns that kingdom will come in all its fullness as we saw in Revelation 21 and 22. Meanwhile, we are called to continue what Jesus began, in the power of the Holy Spirit. To do all those things that we read about in the parable of the sheep and the goats, to work towards establishing the kingdom, God's rule, as we wait for Jesus' return and the coming of the kingdom in all its fullness.

Remember what we said earlier: faith begets hope and hope begets charity – love in action. We have a message of hope that we are called to share with those around us by what we do and what we say. A few years ago I read a book called *The Provocative Church*. The author was saying that the way Christians live, the way they reach out to others, should provoke those people to ask questions about why Christians do what they do. Then they will have an opportunity to share about the hope that is in them.

Today, we live in a culture that has largely rejected belief in God and the possibility of an eternal transcendent future and has lost hope. But hope is God's gift and provision for us for the journey we are on, both our own personal journey and those of the communities of faith to which we belong. The hope we have enables us to resist the pressures of the surrounding culture. We see life from a different perspective, with a different horizon and we 'live, move and have our being' in the light of eternity. With a different set of values and priorities we are set free from the rush to acquire the latest in material possessions or experiences. We can stop searching for self-fulfilment and are free to regard others and to reach out in loving service to them. Hope fixes our eyes on: "What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, what no human mind has conceived – what God has prepared for those who love him." (1 Corinthians 2:9). Amen.