

WHAT DOES 'HOPE' REALLY MEAN?

Address at Johnsonville

P.J. Cullinane

12 April 2018

Our reflections at this time are on HOPE. What does hope mean in situations that sometimes seem hopeless? To address this question, it helps to have some sense of what hopelessness feels like. We can't always have first-hand experience what makes other people feel hopeless, but we can at least take to heart what we know of their sufferings. Empathy leads to deeper insights. But before we go there, let's recall that a week ago we celebrated Jesus' resurrection. That gave us a

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE THAT CHANGES THE PRESENT:

We have all glimpsed those moments when profoundly and intimately we have known the joy of being alive, experiencing the beauty of nature, the love of a spouse or friend, children's smiles, love's sacrifices, the marvels and wonder of life itself! It is precisely these things, - the things that are precious to us in our present lives, that would have been empty and futile if in the end they all come to nothing. Trying to live with that is what scripture calls the crippling power that death had over us - until Jesus' resurrection revealed a future that transforms the present. When we know the outcome of all history, everything is different already. A wonderful line in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council tells us: "All the good fruits of human nature, and all the good fruits of human enterprise, we shall find again, cleansed and transfigured" (GS 39) Nothing precious to us in this life will ever have been lost.

On that Easter Sunday morning, the disciples must have felt they were seeing the world for the first time. Little wonder they described it as a time of coming out of the darkness into the light. But now let us focus on those, near and far, for whom it doesn't feel like that; for whom the darkness is still dark.

THE FEEL OF HOPELESSNESS:

Let's start by asking ourselves some troubling questions. For example: What does hope mean for those who find themselves victims of terrible and cruel injustices and other people's wars, or trapped in impossible situations, and who beg God to change things – and God doesn't seem to be listening?

We agonize over what wars and corruption and starvation do to innocent people; we become angry at senseless slaughters that are simply, and perversely, anti life and anti human. We need to know that these evils will not have the last word, and that ultimately the yearnings of the heart for life, love, peace, forgiveness, belonging, freedom and joy will be fulfilled. When hope is missing, so is life.

What does hope mean to people who know how the Church should be, who willingly play their part, but find themselves frustrated, betrayed or let down by others who get it wrong, or just don't get it? It seems unfair that those who most want what is best for the Church suffer the most when it doesn't happen - even if disciples don't feel entitled to better treatment than their master got.

I am troubled when people tell me they feel disconnected from, un-nurtured by, or marginalized within the Church which, at a deeper level, they believe is their home. When their experience of the Church carries a sense of alienation from their own rightful aspirations, they can begin to feel the Church is only an option, to take or leave. Or, they become part of that gap between *Christian faith* which is rooted in

the historic events of Christ's life, death and resurrection, and "*spiritualities*" that are not consciously connected to those events at all.

I am not less concerned for those who have allowed their faith to become over-grown by weeds - by trivia, superficiality, emptiness and other ways of being less than authentically human and fully alive. There is more at play here than just human folly. As St Paul said, our battle is with "principalities and powers" (Eph. 6:12.) Lack of faith has consequences: when Jesus encountered lack of faith among his own kin, He "could work no miracle there." (Mk 6:1-6).

I think we need to anguish over questions like these in order to penetrate the mystery of hope. It is a law of the gospel that God's power is at its best in and through our experience of weakness and failure. In fact, the whole of historic revelation (about grace and salvation) comes to us through the experience of sin and failure! And isn't this also what we can learn from personal experience? Normally, we come to know the meaning of hope through the loss of lesser hopes.

OUR OWN REACTIONS

Whatever about the things that go wrong, there is also the question of what happens to ourselves when we are faced with wrong-doing and failure, whether it's our own or that of others. How are we to maintain resilience and tranquility, lest the effect on ourselves only makes matters worse?

As well as all the beautiful, lovely, gracious and generous things that give us cause for joy, there are other things happening in the world, and in the Church, that trigger other emotions, such as disappointment, sadness, anger, loneliness, fear, and frustration. It is OK to experience these emotions. What is not helpful – to ourselves or others – is if we become so fixated on the things that go wrong that we become paralysed by them - unable to think or pray or act. This can lead us to "give up", or "drop out", or "look away". This is why we need a deep appreciation of what hope really is.

SO, WHAT IS IT?

A good starting point for this is the New Testament scriptures. The disciples on the road to Emmaus told the stranger who had joined them what they "had hoped" Jesus of Nazareth might have done, until an unjust death had overtaken even him. The stranger explained that a much more wonderful hope had emerged because of Jesus' resurrection, but that his resurrection presupposed Good Friday. It didn't come about merely in spite of Good Friday, it came *through* what happened on Good Friday. That was the hard lesson they hadn't yet learned.

Jesus himself had hoped - that there might have been some other way of fulfilling his mission that didn't involve his suffering. According to the Letter to the Hebrews, "aloud and in silent tears He prayed to the One who had the power to save him out of death...", and his "prayer was heard"! (Heb. 5:7-9) Note: not saved *from* death but *out of* death.

From what was said on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-27), and in Jesus' prayer in the garden (Mk 14:32-36), you'll notice that hope is not any kind of assurance that things will turn out right. Rather, it is deep down knowing that *all will be well even if they don't*. That is hope, and that is what makes it possible to say "not mine but your will be done", because we already know the outcome will be wonderful, whatever happens.

Given that understanding of hope, an important question arises concerning how we ourselves are affected by failure and weakness, whether it's our own or that of others. Are we upset because we had premised our well-being on things turning our right - and so we were sad/lonely/frustrated because they didn't? Would our peace of mind have been more secure if our well-being had been premised on deep down knowing that all will be well even if they didn't?

HOW NOT TO BE PARALYZED

This brings us back to the matter of how not to become paralysed by failure and set back. On a personal level, the example of St Peter can help us: imagine the desolation he must have experienced over his shameful failure. What prevented him from turning in on himself was the experience of being entrusted, by the very One he had denied knowing, with a mission. Receiving this trust in spite of his unworthiness must have been for him a transforming revelation of how great God's love for him was. Knowing how greatly we are loved is what changes ourselves and liberates us for bringing about change. Pope Francis suggests that we need to know both Peter disheartened and Peter transformed, and open our eyes to what is implied by the call to mission that we too have received. "God is present in every life even if it has been a disaster." (Pope Francis)

At the level of the whole Church, the same law of God's power at work in human frailty applies: "A Church with wounds can understand the wounds of the world and make them her own, suffering with them." (Pope Francis). Thirty years ago, when the Catholic Church was beginning to feel the pinch of insufficient vocations to priesthood, Cardinal Godfried Danneels had this to say:

"Not for the first time in the history of the Church, God has forced his people into exile one way or another. The most famous exile in the Bible is that of the rivers of Babylon where the Jews had been deported... It was a sort of iconic exile in which we can read what any kind of exile entails and implies. It represented a time of God's extreme benevolence and tenderness toward his people. I am convinced that God looks upon us with that same tenderness even as we debate the whole problem of vocations.

The first thing the Jews said, according to the prophet Daniel, was; "Lord, we have no temples, no kings, no holy city, no synagogue, no schools, no offerings, no sacrifices, no priests, no rabbis... All we have is a humble and contrite heart." I am sure that 40 years ago, we were totally convinced, although no one ever said it, of our ability to arrange, organize the Church to our liking by our efforts alone. And if they had asked us we would obviously have replied: "No, it is the work of the Lord." But, in a way, that was just the theory. Deep down, we were saying: "We have many priests, many workers, a certain degree of influence, a certain degree of power, prestige, means...We had allowed ourselves to think we were able to construct the Church. Now we are learning slowly and wearily that we are not capable at all..."

Now we are learning to live in a state of dependency, learning progressively and with difficulty to forgo the myth of spiritual and ecclesiastical self-sufficiency. We are learning anew what theology had already taught us as totally abstract theory, situated somewhere in the history of the fourth and fifth centuries, at the time of St Augustine's debate on grace. We were Pelagians after all.

Exile is also the time of God's tenderness. The most beautiful passages of Isaiah on the maternity of God were written in exile. Israel, at the height of its power and with Jerusalem never so glorious, proved unable to understand that God is teaching us to walk, just as a mother teaches

her child to take its first steps. God was only conceivable as a valiant warrior at the head of his army but certainly not as a mother...

We have arrived at this moment which may well be hard but we need not think of as all misfortune. For we have arrived at the time of humility, of dependence, of omnipotent grace, of God's tenderness, of the patience of giving birth, of suffering..."

To all this I say: abiding and resting in this "time of humility, of dependence, of omnipotent grace, of God's tenderness, of the patience of giving birth, of suffering", is how we allow God to do what only God can do. It is not an invitation to fatalistic resignation, nor a condoning of wrong situations. Rather, it is the way we are formed for discerning the ways of God, and acting accordingly.

Finally, the principle of new life through dying applies also to the Church as an institution. The following far-reaching comment is by Hans Urs von Balthasar:

... (The) Church will suffer the loss of its shape as it undergoes a death, and all the more so, the more purely it lives from its source and is consequently less concerned with preserving its shape. In fact, it will not concern itself with affirming its shape but with promoting the world's salvation; as for the shape in which God will raise it from its death to serve the world, it will entrust that to the Holy Spirit. (The Three Forms of Hope, quoted in Weigel's *Soul of the World*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1996, 41)