



Hope: a Christian reflection

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'Hope springs eternal!' is a phrase of poet Alexander Pope, which is often another way of saying 'Never mind', or 'Let's see!' Being hopeful is frequently confused with being optimistic, or having an 'anything goes' attitude towards life. However, in some ways it's easier to explain what hope is *not* rather than what it *is*. Hope is *not* optimism, nor is it positivity. For a Christian, it's possible to be deeply hopeful about the future of the world (because of what we believe about creation, redemption and God's love), whilst not being overly-optimistic about the human capacity to look after it properly.

In his first letter to the early Christians at Corinth, St Paul groups *faith, hope and love* together in the same sentence (1 Corinthians 13: 13). Christians call these the Theological Virtues. In other words, they are key features of what it is to lead a Christian life. So, hope is not an abstract thing, but rather always hope *in* something or someone. It is an act of the will – in other words, no one is going to force you to hope in or for something or someone. You have to choose. In another letter (to the early Christians living in Rome), St Paul reminds his first readers that by definition hope is not something which is seen as he asks rhetorically,

for who hopes for what is seen?

Romans 8: 24

For St Paul, hope is one of the virtues which constitutes a proper Christian outlook on the world. Our hope is in Christ, in his love, and in the promise that he will 'come again in glory' at the end of time. It is a hope which believes that all creation will ultimately share the new life we see in Jesus's resurrection.

But humans are not slaves forced into a specific way of thinking, nor are we computers, programmed only ever to respond in a certain way. We are free, and although what we want, or long for, might be affected by all kinds of factors internal (biological) and external (society, family, etc), we have choices to make. This includes fundamental choices about what we believe to be the ultimate truth about the world, its potential, and what all that means.

So, hope is a choice, at every moment of every day. It will be closely linked to precisely what we value, and what ultimately inspires us. Hope is an activity of the human will, directed to the future, convicted by deep truth, which is not contingent on other indicators, and not reliant on what is seen.

Some of the most beautiful 20th century writing on hope has come from people who have experienced great tragedy. The Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel, whose autobiographical novel *Night* about his life in the Auschwitz and Buchenwald concentration camps was translated into thirty languages, reflected in April 2002 on some of the small moments when hope could be found even amidst the horror of the Holocaust,

“People say occasionally that there must be light at the end of the tunnel, but I believe in those times there was light in the tunnel. The strange way there was courage in the ghetto, and there was hope, human hope, in the death camps. Simply an anonymous prisoner giving a piece of bread to someone who was hungrier than he or she; a father shielding his child; a mother trying to hold back her tears so her children would not see her pain—that was courage.”¹

Viktor Frankl was a psychiatrist who was imprisoned in Auschwitz. His extraordinary book *Man’s Search for Meaning* discusses his own experiences of the Holocaust and also tries to draw some tentative philosophical and moral conclusions which relate to hope. One of the many moving stories he recounts is his arrival at Auschwitz. Forfeiting his clothes, and therefore losing the manuscript of his first book, he was instead given the worn, used prison uniform of a man who had already been sent to the gas chambers. In the coat pocket he found a leaf torn out of a Hebrew prayerbook, which contained the most important Jewish prayer, the *Shema Yisrael*. He writes of this moment, “How should I have interpreted such a ‘coincidence’ other than as a challenge to live my thoughts rather than put them on paper?” For him, the challenge was to live through this experience as if meaning did not ultimately depend on survival. If that were the case, it would be impossible to posit any final meaning to life. Frankl concludes his work with a frank assessment of the contradiction and complexity in summing up the human contribution to these years. In the camps, he writes, humans could either behave as “swine or saints.” The decision for either potential was a personal one. Thus, the capacity to live hopefully is a choice. He concludes his work, “Our generation is realistic, for we have come to know man as he truly is. After all, man is that being who invented the gas chambers of Auschwitz; however, he is also that being who entered those gas chambers upright, with the Lord’s Prayer or *Shema Yisrael* on his lips.”²

Jesus of Nazareth was a good first century Jew. He learned his own faith in the home of his Mother and foster Father, as well as in the temple and at the synagogue. The Psalms, known to Jesus through his own worship, and still used by Jews and Christians today, frequently speak of a trust in the Lord’s goodness, a hope that ultimately all things shall be well,

*I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.
Wait for the Lord; be strong and he shall comfort your heart; wait patiently
for the Lord.
Psalm 27: 16-17*

Elsewhere, the psalmist describes the security and peace the Lord offers,

¹ Elie Wiesel, Days of Remembrance remarks, April 9th, 2002

² Viktor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning* Rider: London, 2004, p. 136

*You are my hiding place and my shield
and my hope is in your word.*

Psalm 119: 114

Jesus himself would have been sustained by this tradition of prayer, which always holds God's goodness and truth before us, no matter how painful, lonely, or distraught the situation may be. On the night of his arrest, Jesus prays with his disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane. It is a night of grief and fear of what is to come. And yet he prays,

*My Father, if it is possible let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want,
but what you want.*

Matthew 26: 39

Even now, moments before his betrayal and arrest, Jesus commits himself to God's will. He trusts that God is working even when he can't see it. Earlier in his ministry, he had taught his disciples to continue to hope at precisely moments like this.

*Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single
grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.*

John 12: 24

In every situation, we can decide whether to hope or not, whether to lift our eyes, or whether to cast them downwards. As we choose to hope, we will discover that we also grow in faith and love. In 2007, Pope Benedict XVI wrote a beautiful letter on the theme of hope which can inspire us to make that choice. He wrote,

“Only the great certitude of hope that my own life and history in general, despite all failures, are held firm by the indestructible power of Love, and that this gives them their meaning and importance, only this kind of hope can then give the courage to act and to persevere.”³

Prayer

O Lord of love, you have set before us that great hope that your Kingdom shall come on earth as it is in Heaven: mercifully enlighten our minds and give us a firm and abiding trust in your love and care. Silence our murmurings, quiet our fears and dispel our doubts, that rising above our worries and our afflictions we may rest on your promises, our rock of everlasting strength: through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

³ Pope Benedict XVI, *Spe salvi* II: 35