

## HOPE SPRINGS ETERNAL

### A Reasonable Account of the Hope That is in You (1 Pt 3:15)

Alexander Pope (1688-1744) in his Essay on Man, I,1732, Hope springs eternal in the human breast, Man never is but always to be, blest.

For some time now a great deal has been written on the meaning of hope. But hope has always been a fundamental feature of human existence. That is why Alexander Pope has been cited here. He is right: it is eternal in the human breast. We cannot live without it, whether hoping that our favourite team will win the game, or that this lecture we are now hearing will not go on too long. Hope is about the future, isn't it? It is the next step after what we are doing now. It is normal and natural to hope. When our hopes are unrealistic we need help, like me hoping to win at Wimbledon next year. But there is nothing wrong with hope when the foundations on which it is laid are sure. And to show this we begin with the Old Testament.

### Hope in the Old Testament

The beginning of the story is with Abraham. Why did he leave his own security in Haran or Ur or wherever it started for the uncertain life of the future? That is still much discussed. The author of Genesis says it was his faith that sustained him, his faith that God would honour his promises (Gn 15:6). That really is another name for hope. Abraham was not penurious when he set out; indeed it was only when in his new land there was a famine that he kept going on to Egypt (Gn 12:10). He left Egypt to come back to the Promised Land (because the Pharaoh did not want to be immoral with Sara!)- and he came back rich. Then it was a question of a family. There is no future if you have no children. We know what followed here. His wife Sarah offered him her Egyptian maid to have children by- astounding- and then when he did have children by this girl named Hagar Sarah got jealous (Gn16:5). But at 99 Abraham is assured that his wife, now 90, would herself bear him a son- and he laughed, and so did she – but only she was rebuked for laughing and then lying that she did not (18:12-14); that is the reason why women were not accepted as legitimate court witnesses in Israel- they would tell lies! However, Isaac was born and the promises were well under way to being honoured. But the only land that Abraham owned by the time he died was the cave of Machpelah which was a tomb for Sarah and himself and those who would come after him (Gn 23:17). Later this became David's seat in the south, and famous to this day as Hebron.

The story of hope involved later the exile in and salvation from Egypt. The more one studies salvation in the OT the more it is tribally and nationally a case of political and economic security, and for individuals health, wealth and well-being. But with so many political failures and economic rebuffs their hope took a strong testing. And since all individuals died anyway eventually it would come to be questioned if that was their whole story, that there was nothing else to hope for. Why would the innocent suffer? What was it all about for them? It took a long time to articulate any theory of immortality. There could be some small evidence of longing for life after death, but there is very little evidence of it before The Book of Wisdom written in Greek at an uncertain date, somewhere in the first century BC. Even in NT times the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection. That perhaps could contribute to the explanation why they collaborated with the Romans and made as much material profit as they could out the occupation.

### The New Testament

The miracles of Jesus provide a point of referral for understanding the continuity of hope with the OT. The ordinary people were like sheep without a shepherd (Mk 6:34). What people looked to Jesus for, and what he was sympathetic towards, was alleviation of their daily suffering. Poor health, death, hunger, and alienation, all provided evidence of his care for those without hope. What did he offer them, and why did they believe him? He offered them a quality life based on himself, involving their repentance. The Sermon on the Mount showed exactly what kind of God he identified with, and what he hoped for from

this Loving Father. Nothing can take secondary place to Jesus's understanding and presentation of who God is, and what he is like as Father. That is the basis of all Christian hope, if only we can believe it. Because on the strength of his understanding of God Jesus exercised his mission. By helping the people to love a loving God he gave them hope. This Good News was sealed with his passion death and resurrection. Of course it involved health wealth and happiness, but for everyone. Nationalism had left the picture with its accent on land and ethnicity. Universal sympathy with the later developing articulation of universal rights and obligations had entered in. God made his rain to fall on the just and unjust alike. Go into the whole world and proclaim the Good News- that God loves you and that all are equal, with no distinction between one person and another. At Gal 3:26-8 St.Paul puts it lucidly for the Galatian converts: All are children of God through faith in Jesus Christ... There is no Jew or Gentile, slave or free man, male or female; you are all one in Christ.

## Immortality

Much has been written recently against the so-called false doctrine of the immortality of the soul. It is being cheerfully and easily blamed for delayed neglect in the social sphere, that it was a tool of manipulation in the hands of an unscrupulous church. And allegedly now a tool in the hands of terrorists who kill themselves on the strength of its promises. It is strange the ease with which people pick on important doctrines and use them with such facility to back up what is only a supposition that needs proving. In fact the doctrine of immortality in the Greek world was worked out as an explanation of what makes human beings different from all other realities. Socrates presented his understanding of human beings as constituted of elements that change and elements that do not. Those that do not are immaterial and can never be destroyed. The word 'soul' was the name given to the unchanging element that never would pass away. When in The Book of Wisdom the idea of immortality is stated it is not stated as a conclusion to a philosophical analysis of the nature of human beings; it is simply affirmed that those who remain faithful to God despite all their suffering will never pass out of existence. When they die they are with him eternally- the text of Wis 3:1ff. is used in Masses for the dead. And eternal happiness is there stated as a reward for fidelity. It is not clear how the person lives on- just that the person lives on in happiness with God. This could be taking for granted the well known Greek idea of the immortality of the soul (The Book of Wisdom is written in Greek and probably written in Alexandria), or it may even envisage the idea of the resurrection of the body. The text states: "Their hope is filled with immortality" (3:4). The hope was that God would never be unfaithful to his covenant, to his promises: the just would never be abandoned by him, never forgotten, not destroyed and lost due to the actions of evil persons.

When we read the NT we must not forget that Greek thought was not foreign to Palestine. Alexander the Great had died in 323 BC. Hellenism was part of the Palestinian experience from that time on. There is no element of hatred of Greek culture in the NT. After all it is one of its glories that The Good News was written in Greek- the Gospel writers come to us in Greek, not in Hebrew or Aramaic. A more powerful statement about the importance of Hellenistic culture could not have been made. The best in ethics in Hellenism is enshrined in the NT- the Pauline epistles have what are called the *Haustafeln*- lists of virtues and vices, basically articulated by Greek philosophers. What is best in culture is blessed by Christianity- why should it not be so? God made the world and made it good. It is His Incarnate Son who is the criterion of what is good. The Church follows Jesus, and the Church is the New Israel.

## A Reasonable Account of the Hope

Christianity is also saying what everyone else says, that hope is fundamental to human experience. But the difference is that Christianity will say what is and is not constitutive of hope that is substantive. And Christianity will say that Jesus, God's only Son, while living on earth taught and lived and experienced the essential meaning of hope. If for pedagogical purposes we start with what it is, the way things are, it is reasonable to expect that in this world we should have the wherewithal to possess: loving parents, a sustainable nutritive and economic life, relationships that give meaning to our existence, and an ultimate purpose for our presence in this world. Christianity acknowledges all of this. But following Jesus it says: wealth will not give you eternal happiness, nor will status, nor will power –

nothing on this earth will give you complete happiness. What will then? As John H. Newman wrote, the true happiness of man is not to know or to effect or to pursue, but to love, to hope, to joy, to admire, to revere, to adore. Its culmination is in heaven. A life lived like Jesus, with Jesus, with his mind and his heart- he the Incarnate Son of God, that is what directs Christian hope. To get there we clearly need love, education, discrimination, and good experience. If we are born unloved, live miserably, are totally uneducated, have no economic future, and treated everywhere as the jetsam and flotsam of society, - then where is our hope? It is because of this, presumably, that in the encyclical *Spe Salvi* Pope Benedict XVI gave examples of slaves who had found salvation. From what they were they had been introduced to that other world where things will not change. Love will last forever. But slaves had to be catechised on this other world by someone who believed in it. The catechised had received love and respect from the catechisers. Everyone must start somewhere.

## False Hopes

Pope Benedict XVI in his encyclical on hope (*Spe Salvi*) draws a distinction between what could be rightly hoped for, and what could not. Totalitarian systems offered hope at the price of freedom and love. What was offered was always on the expectation that individual human beings were secondary in the process. The greatest good of the greatest number was an unsatisfactory unexamined utilitarian way of thinking of human beings; persons are relational human beings in society. Who decides what the greatest good should be? Who decides when the greatest number has been achieved? Concealed in the phrase is an elitism, a hidden programme of who will be in charge. The act of hope is an individual thing. And a collective hope is a real hope. But the one should not be proffered at the price of the other. Individualism is the scourge brought by the *laissez faire* approach to life. Indifference to the individual is the way the totalitarian hope imposes itself.

So what is involved here?

Love and respect. To give a reasonable account of the hope that is in us- with respect- involves wanting others to have what we have, to have as hope what we hope for, and therefore to treat others as we would like to be treated. We do not live isolated from one another. And the community aspect is always fundamental to our hoping. But in saying this in the Christian context our hoping always professes belief in God who in Christ reconciles the world to himself. This is not a utopia without an historical base. To go through life with a certain kind of hope is not to live in utopia. Benedict XVI draws attention to those who survived magnificently as human beings in virtue of the hope they sustained by prayer to the God of love. Charles Péguy wrote that the faith that God loves best is hope.

To say the Our Father is to express the act of faith in the future that lies in God's hands. Give us this day our daily bread- it is in the plural, and with it the relational aspect, sustained by good will for others, and a love that involves forgiveness. One recalls Lenin explaining why the revolution of 1905 did not succeed. It was because the communists then had shown compassion. They never would again, he said, and in 1917 those against the regime were mercilessly eliminated. Only one hope and one means was permitted in totalitarianism. But Christianity without forgiveness is unthinkable. As the present pope says, that does not mean that Christianity is indifferent to justice- certainly not; paradoxically it maintains a doctrine of hell both in this life and the next. And the pope thinks one of the clamorous reasons for expecting and even demanding an after life is that justice should be done. Dives and Lazarus do not sit down at the same banquet in tranquillity in the parable (Lk 16:19-31). But it is the just and loving God who decides. It is not the individual who exacts vengeance here on earth. And it is part of the Sermon on the Mount not only to forgive but to pray for one's enemies.

So a person who hopes is not unrealistic. Christian hope is associated with the God of love accessible in faith in his Son Jesus. Jesus offered hope at every level to those who were suffering and had nothing much to hope for. And the Beatitudes castigate those who already have their reward promising that the meek shall inherit the earth (Mt 5:5). The Christian who hopes should be a loving person, living in a loving community. The Christian answers the Kantian questions unhesitatingly following in the

footsteps of Christ: what can I know, what can I do, what can I hope for? Basic to it all is a concept of human nature; God became a human being with a full human nature. At least that should be one basic agreement, that there is one human nature, and accepted as such among all those who practise medicine. Whether it be with infants or old people human nature is the same, even allowing for some expected variations; all are human beings sharing a common human nature. And the people who call the doctor are hoping to be cured in a human way, and the doctor who attends is normally hoping to help if not always able to cure. And in hoping to cure or help an individual because of the very nature of human existence the doctor will also be hoping to improve the society in which the sick person lives. That engagement involves a public and collective hope. At the heart of it lies an understanding of what it is to be human, and with it go love and trust.

## Trust

Life is impossible without trust. Recently we have seen trust take a battering. In the context of money one can hear it said that nobody trusts anybody anymore. The cumulative effect of this is before our eyes in unemployment and deprivation. Everyone now knows what greed is. It is the destruction of trust and of hope. There is every reason not to be optimistic about human nature- original sin is the Christian name given to the basis of this scepticism. And self-sacrifice is the name given to its antidote. Lived experience of selflessness grounds trust and hope. In the Old Testament trust in God was based on the experience of salvation. Distrust of man was based on the experience of sin. In the NT trust in Jesus is the basis of hope, and the old enemy, sin, is its ruination. When Jesus dined with publicans and sinners they became good, and were filled with hope. But then the Pharisees were filled with hate and fear. The poor sinner who poured oil on Jesus was despised by them because their love did not extend as far as his (Lk 7:38). His love created freedom. Their world limited freedom in the interests of what? A narrow vision of God, thinking he made human nature with limited access to love, abandoning those who were trapped within personal and social limitations.

## Hope all about love?

What is the point of hope if it has nothing to do with love? At the end of the day the real interest in life is love relationships? It seems so obvious. Even greedy multi-millionaires probably hope to be more loved by the people of their choice augmenting extravagant ways of making them happy- the best of everything this world can offer. Even very rich people want to be loved, presumably for themselves and not just because of their money and power. And the whole Christian message- what a weak word this is- is that life is about love. So if you hope you love, if your life is full of hope then you are secure in being loved. Were you totally without love you would have no hope- then what would life be about?!

But is this not still all too individualistic? Certainly for myself as a celibate the tendency is for me to be so self-centred that I may miss the family, national, ecclesial, cosmic dimension in hope. Hope must be content-wise a lot more than my little horizon includes. I look across from my room at the little villages, and the sea, and on the other side of the bay, the houses, and the twinkling lights there at night- their hope? My hope? Surely we cannot be so different. I could so easily forget that my hope depends on the goodness of so many people. I would be totally hopeless without them, even though I forget it so often, or do not know how to conciliate my private hope with the public hope made up of all private hopes. Hope springs eternal- for all, personally and in community.

Let us echo the Holy Father's ending of his encyclical with a prayer to Our Lady, sung every night after Compline: *Salve Regina, Mater misericordiae, vita, dulcedo et spes nostra, salve...* and after our exile show unto us the blessed fruit of thy womb, Jesus. O Clemens, O Pia, O dulcis Virgo Maria.

Rev. Richard J. Taylor