

Advent 1, Sunday, December 1st, 2019

Readings: Isaiah 2:1-5, Psalm 122, Romans 13:11-14, Matthew 24:36-44

Hope: From First Principles

Introduction

I was never more alive than when I played a role in building opportunities for life against the odds: negotiating agreements between the Australian churches and government with the churches in Africa and Asia: agreements for midwifery services in situations of civil war, new methods of agriculture in areas in the Philippines where water was polluted by Australian corporate gold mining, agreements for fishing on the Zambezi so communities could earn their own income and be free of poverty. It was as I often put it, "*Hope with feet on*".

It is easier to speak of hope in concrete terms, through images and experience. But to really get our heads around hope, our theme for this first Sunday of Advent, as we look forward to *Jesus the God-child* among us, I think we need to think it through from *first principles*. So, I really want to think through this value of hope on its own terms. I want to do this, asking three questions: first, what is hope; second, what is hope's opposite; and third, where are we today, and why?

What is Christian hope?

Christian hope comes to us from God's future.

In Christian faith, hope is future oriented. God then is not so much in us, or over us, but *before us, ahead of us*. God is the one who encounters us in God's promises for the future. But there is something else as well: these promises that come to us from the future, what we refer to as the kingdom or reign, always contrast with, contradict the present. These promises don't serve the purpose of making us content with the present, conformed to current reality, but instead, awaken us to what *might be*, how human affairs, how human history *may be transformed*. In Christian faith, hope does not soar *above reality*, escaping it, but embeds itself *in reality*, transforming it. This is exactly what Advent and Christmas are about. The incarnation of God, the coming of God among us in the child Jesus, as a baby in diapers, is an event that challenges the state of things, that provokes vested interests, as we see in the Christmas story, when the politician Herod reacts by attempting to murder Jesus, who threatens to usurp, to destabilize him.

What is Christian hope's opposite?

Sometimes hope is seen as the opposite of melancholy: that hope does not permit sadness, that we must remain optimistic at all times – positive thinkers. That is nonsense. Living hopefully means living with some considerable depth, and to live deeply, unavoidably involves some melancholy. So, hope and melancholy are *not* opposites, but hope and despair *are* opposites. So, what does despair look like?

I think of despair as the surrender of hope. And I think there are two sides to despair. On the one hand, there is the despair of not daring to hope from God, *the despair of staying safe*, preserving ourselves from disappointment. The French writer Albert Camus, spoke of it in terms of, "thinking clearly and not hoping anymore" by which he meant, being brutally analytical without illusions. But there is another sort of anti-hope, another sort of despair, *the despair of resignation*. It is that despair which stems from an absence of meaning, of future, of purpose. I have seen this numerous times in my life in different contexts, different environments: in the smiling faces of Zimbabweans as they tolerated decades of despair under the abusive yoke of Robert Mugabe; and today in the gentle, smiling faces of young women in the early childhood education industry in this country, who are paid an impossible wage by corporate concerns, and who have not had a shred of industrial power to make their situation different. Their generosity and gentleness are exploited... and everyone, everyone smiles...resigned.

Where are we today and why?

My sense is that our current times are times of confusion. As a younger man, I recall, times of robust confidence. We saw ourselves as capable of doing anything. As one friend the other day said to me as she looked back: "we were gods...we could change the world". Today, however, there is a sense of foreboding, a sense of impotence and frustration, a sense of powerlessness.

But I think, this is not the case just because we live in difficult times – for after all – times are always difficult. The difference is the way we are responding. Let me offer a view on this! I think our deficit of hope is tied up with a minimalist, diminished way of seeing ourselves. The unintended consequences of the secular and science, as beneficial as they have been, has been the painting of the human being as little more than the sum total of our biological constructs. The Afro-American writer, Marilynne Robinson, has put it this way:

"Recently I heard a neuroscientist in Europe explain that what we call fear is no more than a pattern of heightened activity, synapses firing in a certain region of the brain". This, Robinson continues, "dispels the mystery of the human" as if we can be summed up on a medical monitor

It is, I think, this diminished way of seeing ourselves today – unintentional as it may be – that saps our hope. But the good news is this: that Christianity at its best, defies, challenges this diminishment. At Advent and Christmas, we celebrate not just the incarnation where God becomes human, deeply human; but we also celebrate in the same breath, that through God's assumption of our humanity, we humans become potentially divine: the church has a word for this: *theosis*.

The good news of Advent and Christmas is this: that we can be hopeful, seriously hopeful, hoping for a new world, hoping against despair. We can be this way, we can do this, not just because God has come among us as human, but because we as humans have tasted divinity: the bridge has been crossed!

We are more than just cells and blood vessels; we are more than what secularism and science have reduced us to; we are God-like because of what God has done for us through Jesus Christ.