

Advent 2: The God of Hope

Series: Advent 2021

Texts: Isaiah 11.1-11; Romans 15.4-13; Luke 21.25-36

Date: 5 December, 2021, Advent 2

Location: St George's Battery Point

Rom. 15:13 May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

We need hope to survive

This is the second week of Advent, the season leading up to Christmas when we look back to Christ's first coming in humility and look forward to his coming again in glory. We live in between the times - the last hour of the night, looking forward to the coming dawn. And this frames and gives shape to our lives. Today we're looking at the God of Hope. We'll look at 4 points.

We need hope to survive

What do we hope for?

Who do we hope in?

How do we hope?

Viktor Frankl was a Jewish doctor who survived the death camps in 2nd World War. In his famous book *Man's Search for Meaning*, he explored why it was that under such horrific conditions some people seemed to stay strong and kind while others gave up or even became collaborators in order to survive. Without hope, prisoners did not survive.

Frankl writes,

The prisoner who had lost faith in the future - his future - was doomed. With his loss of belief in the future, he also lost his spiritual hold; he let himself decline and became subject to mental and physical decay.¹

He tells one story of one prisoner, a composer, who had a dream that on March 30, 1945, they would be liberated. The prisoner was full of hope and convinced his dream was true. As the day drew nearer nothing had changed. The day before he suddenly became it. On the 30th, the day the prophecy said his suffering would end he became delirious and lost consciousness. The next day he was dead.²

We need hope to survive. Without it we wither and die.

Frankl saw the stark reality of this truth in the face of terrible deprivation. But it's no less true in the face of the abundance we enjoy today. No amount of material goods can satisfy our spiritual hunger. Even in the midst of abundance we can wither for lack of hope.

¹ Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Washington Square Press, 1984, 95

² Ibid 96.

As a society we used to hope in God and the life of the world to come, and this made the sufferings of life something we could endure. Suffering could even have meaning and a purpose - to build character. But under the influence of Enlightenment rationalism Western culture lost faith in God and we placed our hope in things like the British Empire, or the nation or democracy. These were things worth suffering and dying for. Now we've lost faith in those too and all we're taught to place our hope for the future in is the Self, or maybe the vague idea of progress. But these have taken some hits. We're sceptical that politics changes anything. We're worried about the looming environmental catastrophe and corporate greed. Covid has reminded us that wealth and technology cannot wholly insulate the self from suffering. Further what a great burden to place all our future hopes on a self which is so fragile, so difficult to discover and maintain. Who has the resources in themselves to meet those challenges?

Hopelessness is one of the conditions of our wealthy society.

The recent legalising of euthanasia across different states in Australia could be seen as a triumph of individual freedom. But read another way it is a sign that we've lost hope. When freedom and pleasure are what you live for, suffering threatens to unravel us. We cannot bear the thought of it. We have no spiritual resources to face suffering, loss, disappointment - which have always been realities of life. We're afraid of what tomorrow will bring, especially in this pandemic.

When there is no security in employment or relationships through life, who will hold me together?

There is an epidemic of mental health issues among our young people. In part it is because we face a crisis of meaning. With no transcendent horizon, all we have to hope for is what we can make of this life. And frankly some people are dealt a rubbish hand. We can distract ourselves from our anxieties about tomorrow through drink and sex and drugs and parties and shopping, but sooner or later we will wake up empty. All the pleasures in the world cannot satisfy the soul.

Imagine you have 2 women of the same age, background, education level and temperament. You hire both of them and say, "You're part of an assembly line. I want you to put part A into slot B and then hand what you've done to someone else. I want you to do that over and over for 8 hours a day." You put the women in the same room, under the same conditions, with the same amount of breaks. There's just one difference between them. You tell the first, "At the end of the year I'll give you \$30,000." To the second you say "I'll give you \$30 million."

After a couple of weeks the first woman will be saying, "isn't this tedious? Isn't it driving you insane? Aren't you thinking of quitting?" But the second woman will say, "No, this is perfectly fine. In fact I whistle while I work."

What's the difference between the two? Same circumstances. Radically different outlook. It's their expectation about the future. What we believe about the future thoroughly affects how we experience the present. We are irreducibly hope based creatures.³ And what we hope for gives meaning to our present.

What do we hope for?

Advent is about hope. Not just hoping for Christmas and parties and presents, but much more: the God of hope.

What do we hope for?

We look for the resurrection of the dead and life of the world to come as the Nicene Creed puts it.

That is to say we hope for a day of justice, where all things will be put right. We hope for evil to be defeated and good to triumph. We hope for a day of healing where all that is broken will be made whole. We hope for the resurrection, where death itself will be undone and we will live forever. In the end we hope to see God face to face and taste the unmixed joy of his infinite love. That is just a snapshot of the future that God has promised. "As the deer pants for the water, so my soul longs after you," the Psalmist says. It is good for the soul just to have that vision of the future brought before our eyes. The beatific vision. The hope of glory. That brings us to point 2.

Who do we hope in?

Hope is one of the 3 *theological* virtues. That is along with *faith* and *love* it is a virtue that is from God and oriented to God, and so it is to shape the Christian life.

Hope is from God. Romans 15:13

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

God is the God of hope because he holds the future in his hands. He holds us in his hands. Even when we don't know who we are one day from the next, he knows who we are and what we will be and he is at work to make us more than we thought it possible to become.

He's the God of hope because he is the God who makes and keeps his promises.

What he has said, he will do because he has both the character and power to keep his promises. This is the link between faith and hope. We can hope in God because he is trustworthy.

The place of course to see this is to look at Jesus. No one has ever seen God, the apostle John writes, but God the only begotten, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known.⁴

He's the Root of Jesse, in whom the Gentiles, the nations put their hope.

³ Illustration taken from Tim Keller, *Making Sense of God*, Hodder and Stoughton, 2016, 153

⁴ John 1.18

We look forward to the day when he will judge the nations with righteousness, when he will bring justice, when he will bring such a peace that even nature itself will no longer be red in tooth and claw.

How do we hope?

Romans 15.13 tells us that Hope is the work of God. Hope is empowered and implanted in us by the Holy Spirit

Ultimately hope has to come from outside of us. That is, we have to hope in something bigger than ourselves, and hope is something drawn out of us as it were.

Romans 15.13 also tells us that hope produces the fruits of *joy and peace*

- **Joy** because God's love is poured out into our hearts. The same Spirit who empowers us to hope is himself the first fruits of the new creation, the deposit guaranteeing our inheritance. He is a gift from the glorious future that God has prepared, the one who will see us there. This is why Peter can say we have new birth into a *living hope*. This joy is the joy of God's own life overflowing from within us.
- **Peace** - because the great gift of the gospel of Christ is peace with God. The restoration of fellowship. And having been reconciled to a God we know we shall see him face to face, so we have peace as we hope. Nothing can separate us from his love in Christ.

How can we cultivate the hope of glory?

Jesus tells us in our gospel reading, Luke 21.36: *Watch and pray*

- **Watch.** Look for Christ's coming. I remember hanging out with a group of friends when we suddenly heard a very loud, unexpected and unexplained rumbling. One of my friends immediately thought - is this the return of Christ? He was looking for, expecting Christ to return. Years ago I visited my old Boys Brigade leader who is a missionary in Nepal. I asked him how he managed to cope seeing all the suffering of people around him. I clearly remember his response. He said, "I look for Jesus' return, when everything will be put right." Keep being unsatisfied with this world. Sit in our longings. Watch. This will feed our hope.
- **Pray.** There are 2 prayers given to us in Scripture to pray in the hope of Christ's coming again in glory: *Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven* and *Come lord Jesus, come!* This will feed our hope as we pray to the God who can do more than we ask or imagine.

And as we watch and pray we wait patiently through the final watch of the night.

Our hope though is not just about the future and Christ's coming again

It's also about tomorrow, about people, about your life, about injustices

Because God is at work. The kingdom of God is at hand.

Tomorrow is in his hands

He is in the business of transforming lives. Change and growth is possible, no matter where you find yourself or how hopeless things look for you or for others. So wait patiently.

For yourself. For those who frustrate you and who in terms of human power seem beyond hope.

But hope also moves us to act - because God is at work. He is bringing his kingdom and the gates of hell cannot stand against it. And he uses weak and frail and fallible people like me and you. There is no place where his light cannot shine - your family, your work, the communities of which you are a part.

Hope enables you to grow old, to not get bitter, but to be filled with joy and peace and to be released to serve, to bless, to invest in the next generation, at the very least to pray.

This Advent, may your heart hope again in the hope of God. And may the Holy Spirit cause that hope to overflow from us so that we can hold out the light of hope to those around us. May they see the joy and peace that comes from the God of hope and saw be drawn to hope in him.

Collect for 2nd Sunday in Advent

Blessed Lord,

you have caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning:

grant that we may so hear them,

read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them,

that, by patience and the comfort of your holy word,

we may embrace and ever hold fast

the blessed hope of everlasting life,

which you have given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ.