

## “And therefore I have hope ...”

Hope is the message of the moment. At least, it has been the message of the North American presidential campaign. The president elect, Senator Barack Obama, spoke of “the audacity of hope”. “Hope” and “change” were the watch-words of his campaign. And it is no coincidence, no aberration, that the North American election was loaded with such terms. Post the terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001, amidst a staggering global financial crisis where homeowners are losing their homes, layoffs are escalating, prices are sky-rocketing, is it any wonder that the word “hope” holds such purchase at these times? Hope, of course, is not the exclusive domain of aspiring presidents. The word “hope” is the bread-and-butter of sympathy cards, self-help manuals, talk-show hosts and preachers. The idea of hope is thus conveyed as something *better*; something *more*, and something *new*. In other words, such expressions of “hope” are future-oriented. The message of Obama was, “Elect me and I will give you hope and change; elect the other guy and you will be given neither hope nor change”. But whatever “hope” might be spoken of by its various spokespeople in politics and on television, to properly speak of hope, we have to talk about hope in the context of the Christian understanding of God; that is, the god revealed to us in Jesus Christ (1 Tim 1:1). There is no other hope. There are imitations – things, events and people that propose themselves to be hope. There are greeting cards, sympathy cards, and talk show hosts; there are platitudes about the “other side” and “hoping for the best”. But the god who *is*, the I Am, the Alpha and Omega, the trinitarian god of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit leaves no room for these poor imitations. There is no other god. There is no

other hope, Christians assert, apart from God.

The Bible talks about hope in very particular ways. The Psalmist

the Lord. The writer of Hebrews encourages to seize the hope set before us (Heb 6:18) and to hold fast to the hope we confess (Heb 10:23);

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proclaims that God is the hope of all the ends of the earth (Ps 65:5), that we should set our hope in God (Ps 78:7), hope continuously (Ps 71:14), and hope in God’s salvation of us (Ps 119:166). The writer of the Proverbs says that the hope of the righteous ends in gladness (Prov 10:28). The apostle Paul reminds his readers what hope really is: “... for in hope we were saved. Now, hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen. But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it in patience.” (Rom 9:24). Paul extols his readers to rejoice in hope (Rom 12:12); reminds his readers that we have hope in Christ (1 Cor 15:19); and prays in Ephesians 1:17-19 that:

*... the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.*

Scripture goes on reminding us what hope is about. In Colossians 1:27 Paul says that the hope of glory is Christ within us, and in 1 Thessalonians 1:3 Paul says that we are called to steadfastness of hope in

while 1 Peter reminds us of the new birth we have in the living hope of the resurrection of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 1:3).

### **Making hope specific**

Hope is not an abstract term, a word that has meaning by itself. Whatever might be said about hope in general terms – that we live in a hopeless society; or that a particular generation is hopeless; that hope comes from positive thinking; that a trait of post-modernity is a distinct lack of hope; or that we need to re-fashion Christian hope in a way that are more relevant to contemporary despair – these statements mean nothing without reference to God, especially as revealed, ultimately in trinitarian terms, to us in Christ. That is to say, hope is relational. Hope is personal. Hope is lived amongst us through the presence of God through God’s Spirit and Son. We cannot merely intellectually assign to hope a particular definition. If it were that simple, then we need only turn to a dictionary. Understanding that God, in Christ, is *the* definition of hope completely changes how we then live – knowing that, our hope is not in any abstract, amorphous or malleable concept, but in the living, life-changing, reality of God revealed in Christ. John Webster puts it like this:

[A]n inquiry into Christian hope as a moral phenomenon asks a number of related questions. Are the world and its history such that hope is not a fantasy but a truthful estimation of our situation? What kind of person is the Christian who hopes, and in whose company does she live and act? Existing within that world and history, with a particular given identity and a particular set of companions, to what kind of hopeful action is the Christian summoned, equipped with what resources and for what ends? Taken together, answers to those questions would form an account of the conditions and modes of Christian hope. But they would only do so if they rested upon an answer to the fundamental question concerning Christian hope, namely the identity of God as the object and ground of Christian hope, the one by and towards whom all hopeful action is directed. A moral theology of Christian hope, that is, must start from the Christian confession of God.<sup>1</sup>

Talking about hope in Christian terms necessarily relies on confessing certain things about God. Talking about hope in any other terms is hugely deficient. Thus, when we speak of hope, we must begin with God, from whom all hope derives and in whom all hope is vested.

But this conversation must also recognise that to confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, as we must if we wish to speak about Christian hope, is also to say that our attempts at grasping, defining, conceptualising hope will always fall well short. This is for two reasons. Firstly, our very brokenness, our ability only to "see dimly" – to use Paul's language (1 Cor 13:12) – means that what we see of hope is marred by our sin. The second reason is that we cannot ever speak of God in ways that fully comprehend or encapsulate who God is. God is greater than human speech and, without faith, beyond human understanding. So our hope rests on God actualised by his gift of faith and given expression in our confession about God. Moreover, our very sinfulness, brokenness, and

despair compel us to discover the hope that is God and therefore discover that God is.

Scripture confesses this to be true: our hope is in God. And our hope in God brings us new life; it is life-giving hope. It is hope in something that will not disappoint us; it is hope in the truth, the way and the life. But the hope that we have in God is not just hope for something at the end of this age; God gives us this hope through the Holy Spirit for this present moment *and* for the future. We could say that God gives us hope every morning and every day. As our confession that Jesus Christ is Lord must be a daily confession, so God's faithfulness, mercies, and hope are new every morning. We are reminded of this by the writer of Lamentations (3:21-24), who says:

*But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness. "The Lord is my chosen portion", says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him".*

This was true to the lamenter as it is true to us; and the rest of Scripture attests it to be true.

### **The beginning of hope**

Scripture reveals to us the god in whom we have hope. In Genesis, we start with creation itself, the very beginning of all things. We start with creation because it sets the scene for what is to follow, both chronologically and theologically. Who we are, as God's people (the purpose for which God has called us), rests upon the fact that *we are created by God*. Popular Christian theology often misses this point and goes straight to the passion narrative. To be sure, Christian faith depends on the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ and all that that means for our understanding of God and of ourselves. But God's work in the world neither began nor ended there. There is a story to be told and we must tell it from the beginning.

Christian reflection about God is always about the god who *is*. We start with trust in who God is,

revealed in Scripture, and all the rest follows. So when we speak of creation or redemption or new life, it is not about what creation means for me, or how can I be redeemed, or what does my new life look like. Rather, it is about what can we say and know about the creator god who redeems and gives life. The story of Scripture is *God's* story before it is ours. That is not to say we do not participate in it, or that by reading it we don't see it through the lens of our experience, culture or theological tradition. It is accepted that we read and participate in God's story in particular ways, but those ways are never definitive; they are always open to the critique of the Holy Spirit, constantly bringing our focus back to the god who begins and ends all things.

We often think of hope as something for the hereafter or the future generally, for example, a hope that we might get better after sickness, a hope that spring will follow winter, or a hope that all will be made well in the world. But – and in a world filled with cries for hope this is especially salient – our Christian confession says that we have a very *present* hope: we are made new in Jesus Christ. This is not just a past event, nor something which only finds its fulfilment at the end of time, it is something which is presently happening: *we are being* made new in Christ.

### **Hope in the reality of suffering**

But not only is the hope we have in God both present and future-oriented hope. Through Christ, hope takes on new meaning when it is contrasted with despair. Without its shadow, without despair, hope can become easily abstracted, something removed from our everyday experiences. However, we might find that our encounters with lived realities – particularly when they are marked by hardship and difficulty – place new challenges on the way we understand and experience Christian faith. Scripture draws out the reality of God in the reality of suffering. This is, of course, the parallel story to the exodus recorded for us in the gospels: God provides

liberation for all people, not through grand gestures of parted oceans, but through the suffering and ignominy of Jesus Christ being crucified on a cross.

However, God's hope being present in suffering is not unique at the cross. God's people have often been a people who have experienced profound suffering. In Scripture we see the god who is always present alongside the experiences of men and women who find his presence hard to sense. The Psalms are one such part of Scripture to which we might turn.

Scripture assures us that God is our "refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble" (Ps 46:1, KJV) and the exodus story confirms this assurance. God's presence, even within the harshest wilderness, even against the most oppressive of regimes, is a presence that is always liberating and life-changing. The god the Scriptures attest to is a god who is *always* victorious. This is what Yahweh was demonstrating in bringing his chosen people out of Egypt and into the Promised Land: the god of Abraham and Jacob is the one true God, the creator of the heavens and the earth, against whom nothing can triumph and under whom all the rulers of the world are placed. God's liberating act of freeing his chosen people became *the definitive story* of God's faithfulness. The exodus story became the story that has been remembered in ritual and thanksgiving ever since. God is faithful, this story says, and because God is faithful, we can have hope. No matter how enslaved we might be, no matter how oppressed, no matter how much we may suffer, the god who created the world and all that is in it, says "I am making all things new" (Revelation 21:5). In leading God's people from slavery to freedom, God is always, everywhere, bringing in the new day.

### **Our confession of the god who gives us hope**

And in line with this, to describe ourselves as Christians, as followers of Jesus Christ, means that we are also saying that there are things

about Jesus Christ which we hold to be true. We confess that "Jesus Christ is Lord". We say, in faith, that God is victorious, the deliverer, the bringer of good things, and the one who clothes us by his grace. Our Christian confession is freighted with statements of faith. But we are not confessing faith in a proposition, nor in some kind of abstract deity, but, rather, we are confessing faith in *this* God, Jesus Christ. And such a confession is one that rests not on our experiences or emotions or backgrounds or upbringings, but on God's Spirit within us drawing us to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. We confess that it is by God's initiative that such a confession of faith can be said to be true and meaningful for us. This is no more important than the times when we perceive God's presence with us to be gone, when we feel isolated, bereft and alone. The very darkness of such experiences draws us to confess that we believe that Jesus Christ is Lord even when we might see no evidence of Christ's lordship in the events around us.

The passion story, recorded for us in the Scriptures, tells us that Christ himself knew of this darkness and isolation. We have, as one example, the blood-sweating experience of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane, as he pleads to God to take away the cup he has to drink, the cup of suffering. We also have, even more wrenchingly, the cry of Christ on the cross of, "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mk 15:34).

Theologians continue to grapple with the experience of Christ on the cross, how it is that a member of the God-head could be separated from God in such a painful way. Whatever we might want to say in response to this event, we cannot say that Christ, in the crucifixion, became somehow less divine or less human. We cannot say that, at that moment on the cross, Christ's divinity was somehow evacuated and that this cry of desolation was only the *human* Christ crying out. Nor can we say that this cry of desolation was only from the *divine* Christ but that the human Christ somehow was immune from it.

Indeed, we cannot properly speak of the *human* and the *divine* natures of Christ as if they are two distinct natures at all. We confess that Jesus Christ is God incarnate, fully human and fully divine. Confessing thus, we can see that this cry of profound isolation on the cross was a cry of God himself. Through the crucifixion, God did not become somehow *less* God, *less* divine, *less* powerful. On the contrary, we confess, with Paul, that Christ's power was revealed supremely in the cross (1 Cor 1). We confess that it is *the same God* who led the Israelites out of Egypt into the Promised Land *and* who is tortured and crucified on a cross. And thus, we can go on to say, that as God was present in that very darkest of history's moments, God is also present in our very darkest, hopeless moments as well.

The present popularity of hope speaks profoundly of the wretched of despair of so many. That hope is needful tells us that despair is plentiful. Such are the realities of our time. To such cries of despair and desolation, we confess that God is the one in whom we should place our hope. Scripture witnesses this to be so. God's character, revealed through God's encounters with God's people, reveals it to be genuine. The words of the law and the prophets, the psalmist and the lamenter, the gospel writer, and the revelator declare it to be true. As expressed in Psalm 139:9-10, "... if I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there God's hand will lead me, and God's right hand shall hold me fast". Therefore, we have hope.

### **Endnote**

1. John Webster, *Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics II* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2005), 196.



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