

## **Greenways Benefice Weekly Devotional (No. 1)**

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Our Nation and the world seems in dire need of a fresh injection of hope. There is much uncertainty, not a little threat, and considerable suffering. But that isn't the whole picture.

Yes, a maverick US president ignores experts and announces policy in 140 inflammatory characters. The UK government understandably refuses to declare its hand on the next stage of the Brexit negotiations on trading etc., but in so doing leaves its citizens fearful for an unknown future. Now the Coronavirus disaster! Russia and North Korea are becoming more bullish. Terror threats are high. The resources of essential services are squeezed to the bone. Housing and living costs are rising faster than incomes pushing millions of people "Just About Managing" closer to or over the edge. Millions more starve in Yemen and Nigeria; large areas of once bustling cities in Syria are now piles of rubble.

But there is also much to celebrate. There is, arguably, still more good in the world than bad.

There would be so much more suffering and unhappiness if it were not for the armies of volunteers who staff and resource children's, youth and old people's centres and activities; who raise funds for charities providing services the state cannot afford; who organise food banks and credit unions; who become street pastors, prison visitors, and the like. There are international aid and rescue agencies clearing up the mess left by power-crazed national and tribal leaders. And millions of ordinary people do what they can to care for their relatives and neighbours, protect the environment and support their community.

We should never let the bad news overshadow the often unsung acts of peace and goodwill that last all year long. There is reason to be hopeful even when clouds gather on the horizon. "True hope is honest," says Christian writer Philip Yancey. "It allows a person to believe that even when she falls down and the worst has happened, still she has not reached the end of the road. She can stand up and continue."

Hope is not wishful thinking, Yancey offers a simple definition of hope. "Hope means simply the belief that something good lies ahead. It is not the same as optimism or wishful thinking, for these imply a denial of reality. Often, I think those of us who stand alongside suffering people tend to confuse hope and optimism."

It is hope that drives research to find cures for diseases, to discover more effective technology, and to develop more nutritious strains of crops. It is hope that inspires people to devote themselves to community service and fuels the dedication of the caring professions and development agencies. It is hope that fires the determination of people in difficult situations to survive against the odds. It is hope that gets most people out of bed in the morning.

By contrast, the lack of hope can have devastating physical and mental consequences. We need to see where we are going. Circumstances may be difficult but for as long as we can see at least a short way forward we can usually cope. But when all we can see is a long dark tunnel or an apparently dead end, despair and depression soon set in and with them comes the sheer physical inability to fight back and take initiatives. The person caught in poverty may find their confidence is drained and that it is impossible to seek more or better work; their life stagnates or even spirals downwards. The

elderly person in a care home or isolation, perhaps far from family and former friends, sees nothing to hope for except further degeneration, and having no reason to live slowly fades away.

Hope is a factor in the well-known placebo effect, in which a patient's belief that (say) a pill will cure an ailment appears to reduce their symptoms even if the pill happens to be inert. (Doctors admit to sometimes prescribing such "drugs" to the "worried well", and there are concerns that clinical drug trials may not reveal the true effects of new drugs because of the placebo effect. In one trial an established drug (diazepam) was found to be completely ineffective when given to post-operative patients who were not told what it was for.)

Less well-known is the hope-less "nocebo effect", a variant of the worried well or hypochondriac syndrome in which people can become unwell, or not recover as they are expected to, because they have, in effect, lost hope. In a famous but tragic case in the 1970s, a man was diagnosed with end stage liver cancer and told he had six months to live. He died within that period, but an autopsy showed that he had only a small tumour that was not spreading. A doctor commented, "He didn't die from cancer, but from believing he was dying from cancer."

This is hardly a new discovery. Centuries before Christ, a wise man wrote, "Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life" (Proverbs 13:12).

The Christian gospel is full of hope, but not the kind which cynics may accuse it of. Christian hope is not primarily about renewal and restoration in a perfect setting after we die. That promise is there, but biblical hope is as much to do with this life as it is with the next. That is because it is centred on a God who is always active in the world and who purposes the renewal of all creation. We are not passengers on the platform waiting for the delayed train to heaven, but co-workers with the living God in making his world a better place – to be people of hope who bring hope to a troubled society. We are certainly waiting for the return of the resurrected Christ, but all the while we're called to be making the world and ourselves ready for the perfect makeover he will inaugurate.

So Paul encourages the stressed Roman Christians, "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" (Romans 15:13). Indeed, hope itself is bred from the experience of living faithfully for God in trying conditions: "We know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy spirit, who has been given to us" (Romans 5:3-5).

The author of the letter to the Hebrews describes the work of Christ to bring forgiveness, new life and direct access to the living God as a hope which is "an anchor for the soul, firm and secure" (Hebrews 6:19). One commentator said on this verse, "We are moored to an immovable object"<sup>5</sup> – there's hope for you! We cannot be blown out of the water or dashed on the rocks.

With God, there is always a tomorrow. With God, there is always something to do and to discover. With God, there is always help on hand (even if only to endure). With God, there is always guidance for the future (if only to press on into the unknown). With God, there is always love (even when I feel alone or abandoned). With God, there is always hope – now, as well as in the longer-term future.

Biblically, hope is closely related to faith (trust) in God and love (for God, and for others), as in 1 Corinthians 13:13. "Biblical hope is never to be confused with a feeling that things are going well, or even that they might turn out well. It is properly a habit of obedience. Like love and faith, hope is both received as a free gift of God and expressed as a deliberate attitude and disposition."