

The Advent Course - Session One

HOPE

Welcome. Here we will take a little Advent journey through the virtue of Hope in the Christian Tradition. Beginning with Scripture, then moving into Art and ending with prayer; we offer these thoughts and meditations for your reflection and your own prayers. Note down the things that chime a bell or make your heart flutter.

Hope is a waking dream - Aristotle

Scriptural Hope

Let's say you want to describe the feeling of anticipating a future that's better than the present, you might be giddy or excited or maybe unsure; most of us know that experience, we call it 'hope.' It's a state of anticipation and it's crucial for healthy human existence, and it's a really important concept in the Bible. In fact, there are many words for hope in the ancient languages of the Bible, and they're all fascinating. In the Old Testament, there are two main Hebrew words translated as Hope.

יָחַל YAKHAL

The first is YAKHAL, which means simply to wait for, like in the story of Noah and the ark, as the floodwaters recede Noah had to YAKHAL for weeks.

קָוָה QAVAH

The other Hebrew word is QAVAH, which also means to wait, it's related to the Hebrew word QAV, which means cord. When you pull a QAVAH tight you produce a state of tension, until there's



relief, that's QAVAH; the feeling of tension and expectation while you wait for something to happen.

The prophet Isaiah depicts God as a farmer who plants vines and QAVAH's for good grapes, or the prophet Micah talks about farmers who both QAVAH and YAKHAL for morning dew to give moisture to the land. So in biblical Hebrew hope is about waiting, or tense expectation.

But, waiting for what?

In the period of Israel's prophets says the nation was sinking into self destruction Isaiah said 'At this moment, the Lord's hiding his face from Israel, so I will QAVAH for him.'

The only hope Isaiah had in those dark days was the hope for God Himself, you find the same notion of hope all over the book of Psalms, where these words appear over 40 times. In almost every case what people are waiting for is God, like in Psalm 130, the poet cries out from the pit of despair, I QAVAH for the Lord, let Israel YAKHAL for the Lord because he's loyal, and will redeem Israel from its sins.

Biblical hope is based on a person, which makes it different from optimism. Optimism is about choosing to see in any situation how circumstances could work out best, but biblical hope is not focused on circumstances. In fact hopeful people in the Bible often recognise, there's no evidence things will get better, but you choose hope anyway.

Like the prophet Hosea; he lived in a dark time when Israel was being oppressed by foreign empires, and he chose hope when he said 'God could turn this valley of trouble into a door of hope, like the day when Israel came up from the land of Egypt.' God had surprised his people with redemption back in the days of the Exodus, and he could do so again. So it's God's past faithfulness that motivates hope for the future you look forward by looking backward, trusting in nothing other than God's character. It's like the poet of Psalm 39 who says, and now 'Oh Lord, what else can I QAVAH for, you are my YAKHAL.

ἐλπίς ELPIS

In the New Testament, the earliest followers of Jesus cultivated the similar habit of hope. They believe that Jesus life, death and resurrection was God's surprising response to our slavery to evil and death. The empty tomb opened up a

new door of hope, and they use the Greek word ELPIS to describe this anticipation. The apostle Peter said that Jesus's resurrection opened up a living hope that people can be reformed to become new and different kinds of humans.

More than once the Apostle Paul says, the good news about Jesus announces the ELPIS of glory. In both cases this ELPIS is based on a person, the risen Jesus who has overcome death. And this hope wasn't just for humans, the apostles believe that what happened to Jesus in the resurrection was a foretaste of what God had planned for the whole universe. In Paul's words, it's a hope that creation itself will be liberated from slavery to corruption into freedom when God's children are glorified.

So Christian hope is bold, waiting for humanity and the whole universe to be rescued from evil and death, and some would say it's crazy, and maybe it is, but biblical hope isn't optimism based on the odds. It's a choice to wait for God to bring about a future that is as surprising as a crucified man rising from the dead. Christian hope, looks back to the risen Jesus in order to look forward. And so we wait, that's what the biblical words for hope are all about.

Scripture References:

Isaiah 8.17
Psalm 130 5-7
Psalm 39.7
1 Peter 1.3

with grateful thanks to The Bible Project for this word study.

Hope in a Time of Uncertainty,

a meditation by Rev'd Petra Shakeshaft

*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 with patience.
Romans 8. 24*

Picture: Hope by George Frederick Watts 1886 Tate Britain



“When I was about nine my mother inherited a book of Victorian prints from her grandmother. She invited me to choose one for my bedroom. This image hung above my bed for the next eleven years. My mother couldn’t understand this choice But I found, even then, something profoundly, painfully beautiful about it I couldn’t explain. It moved something deep inside me; something more than simply a response to visual beauty.

Hope is personified as a young woman, seated precariously on a globe, her eyes bandaged, clinging to a battered lyre. Her head bent down, she listens intently for the possibility of the music she might extract from a single remaining string. This intense isolation; this desolation, the precariousness of her position, speaks of the fragility of Hope.

There is an audacity to this Hope; what does this wretched creature see or hear or know that gives rise to Hope? Is there a glimmer of light shining in the darkness that cannot be overcome? Is it that same glimmer that keeps us going in the midst of despair, that kept Moses and the people of Israel going through the wilderness, or when they were exiled in Babylon, or Job on his pile of ashes?

At the top of the painting there is a tiny pinprick of light; a tiny vestige of Hope. It’s easy to miss. In life it’s easy to miss; easy to look in the wrong places, try to conjure it up in music of our own making.

Here it is almost as though the darkness has swallowed it up, consumed it, has begun to overcome it ... and yet, there it is, coming from somewhere beyond, shining on the misery and tragedy of the world. If we dare to look up, to tear ourselves away from the music we are trying to make with our own battered instruments, pull away our blindfolds, we can see Hope, and hear the soaring note ringing through the universe on the string plucked by God’s own hand.”

Threshold R S Thomas

I emerge from the mind's
cave into the worse darkness
outside, where things pass and
the Lord is in none of them.
I have heard the still, small voice
and it was that of the bacteria
demolishing my cosmos. I
have lingered too long on
this threshold, but where can I go?
To look back is to lose the soul
I was leading upwards towards
the light. To look forward? Ah,
what balance is needed at
the edges of such an abyss.
I am alone on the surface
of a turning planet. What
to do but, like Michelangelo's
Adam, put my hand
out into unknown space,
hoping for the reciprocating touch?



Hope 2020

Monoprint with gold thread, Petra Shakeshaft

This image was made just as we prepared to go back into another lockdown for November.

How long, O God, how long?

It's the question on so many lips. We wait for a day in some distant future when a vaccine might set us free again. Two thousand years ago in Palestine, the people waited in the darkness of occupation and corruption in a world that, in many ways has not changed. Human nature, it seems, does not. People still hunger. People still thirst for justice. There are wars and rumours of wars.

Again, Autumn leaves in various stages of decay provide a backdrop of shadows of themselves and a focus on the physical world. The Covid virus floats above, part of the corruption and darkness we find ourselves in as we approach this period of Advent. Where is the Hope?

We live in the world. We cannot avoid the darkness and corruption, it is all around, but we do not have to be defined by it. By going into the darkest places with compassion, with service, with love, we find ourselves in the very same places Jesus went, and there we find him still, bringing Hope to our Advent waiting. It's there in the many small acts of kindness and selflessness: waiting with the sick and dying, washing small hands or full grown frail bodies. It's there driving up and down the country, bringing vital goods and medicines. It's in the phone call, in the hand that waves – that wants so much to touch and hold. It's in the hands that dare to plunge into life's messiness and draw out the golden thread of Hope and hold on.

In the print, if you look carefully, you will see the golden thread. It links a dead leaf to a single seed. As the print is moved light is reflected up and down the thread. And maybe, like the last remaining string on Hope's lyre, we can hear it's note ringing out through the universe, plucked by God's

Candle - Eigg (by Winifred Nicholson)

A Meditation on Hope by Rev'd Dr Nicola Bown.

A candle stands on the windowsill of a cottage on the Scottish island of Eigg.

Winifred Nicholson who painted this picture, loved colour and her pictures are full of it. Her recurring theme is windows often with vases of flowers. But this picture is unusually dark.

Above and below the flaring candle are bands of grey, and deep blue. Whilst the landscape outside the window is reduced to abstract strokes of colour, the candle doesn't seem to have been lit at night. For the colours outside are bright. It is the inside, that is dark with these deep,

rich tones of blues and greys suggesting the darkness of the room. The bright light of the candle deep yellow and vermilion red. Can't contrast strongly with the interior of the house. If you looked in from outside. You would see a candle flame bright in the deep darkness. In daylight the flame of a candle is almost invisible. It needs darkness for its light to show. In the same way, hope means little in sunny good times. It needs the deep blues and greys of our dark times to show us where the light is. A candle doesn't give much light. Just enough to see the way forward.

Hope is that candle flame flaring bravely in the dusk. Drawing us onwards, showing us that the dark too is full of colour.

On Christmas Eve, we hear the beginning of John's Gospel read; the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it. Christ is the candle burning brightly, to give us hope, bringing the dark and the light together.



Reflections

*Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess,
for he who promised is faithful. Hebrews 10.23*

How do you respond to Watt's painting of Hope?

What gives you hope?

What are your prayers during this time of uncertainty?

Put some earth, decaying leaves, seeds and things you can find in the garden or out walking into a small bowl. Put a nightlight or small votive candle in the middle - if you have some gold thread, you might like to put some threads coming from the earth, or you could use a little foil to reflect the light. Use this as a focus for prayer this week.

Or, get some strands of different coloured wools, or embroidery threads, each colour to represent a different aspect of prayer; for example blue for lament, red for praise ... put a gold thread among them and divide into three and plait. Notice how the gold surfaces and disappears.

Light a candle in the day time, then leaving it in the same position light it again when it is dark. Observe the different way the light works, moves, and reflects

Prayers

“But those who hope in the Lord
will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint.”
Isaiah 40.31

Be strong and let your heart take courage
all you who wait for the Lord

Holy One,
whose coming we await,
we lift our hearts to you:
Remind us of your faithfulness,
that we may trust
ever more deeply in your grace.
We set down the tasks of the day
so that we may arise renewed
To love and serve you
Amen

Holy One, come this night
open my heart to the brightness of your love.
release my fears and revive my hope,
that I may rest well and rise to share in your love.
Amen.

Even in the waiting,
God is with me.

**May God bless you with abundant hope
and I look forward to next week when we will explore peace**