

Hope is an Advent theme. Hope in the God who has come, is coming and will come. Hope in the God who is always reaching out in love to us. Now is a good time to reflect on this, because it feels as though we are living through something of a crisis of hope at the moment, a kind of collective depression. We seem helpless in the face of growing inequality between rich and poor, the threat of ecological disaster, the spread of terrorism, clashes between religions. As our political leaders struggle with our economic problems, they command less and less respect. Meanwhile we seem to be less kind to one another, less prepared to understand; more critical, more selfish. Today, hope is at a premium.

When I was a child, after the Second World War, there was still the confidence, at least in my little world, that a story could be told about humanity's happier future. Rationing finally ended; we were able to have a car, go on holiday to the seaside. Gradually, in the country at large, things got better; even the food improved. But little by little, over succeeding decades, optimism drained away. There were a succession of nasty little wars, oil crises, inner city riots, 9/11 and its aftermath, so that by the turn of the millennium many had lost confidence in the future and began to live just for the present moment. Eat, drink and be merry, for we have no idea about what will happen tomorrow. As a way of coping, many tend to turn to the small-scale things that they feel they can depend on – work (if there is any), families, hobbies, having fun. The trouble is that when the chips are down, these are not really enough to give our lives depth or meaning. Which is why, if we understand the signs of our times truly, this seems an important moment. Christians believe in a Gospel of hope, which is needed more than ever today. If we can find ways to live it with imagination and integrity, then we shall be offering something that our contemporaries are yearning for, even if this yearning is often hidden behind all sorts of different disguises.

So what do we have to share? We believe in the ultimate triumph of good over evil, the coming of the Kingdom, the end of all death and suffering. Alright, we have no details of how this may take place, no privileged information about what will happen to humanity in the next 1000 years. But perhaps that's no bad thing. After all, when you think of those who have come up with particular blueprints – Stalin, Hitler, Pol

Pot - being certain about the future does not suggest either that you will be right, or that the way you introduce your brand of heaven on earth will be compassionate or inclusive. Perhaps we should be looking in a different direction, and be prepared to be a bit more radical.

So consider the Gospel story. On the road to Emmaus, the two disciples told the stranger who approached them that they had hoped that Jesus would have been the one to redeem Israel. His death had left his followers disillusioned and distraught. At a stroke, it seemed that their future had disappeared. Judas had sold Jesus. Peter had denied him, and the others had mostly run away. The founding story of Christianity begins with betrayal and shattered hopes.

So where can we find a hope that is dependable? We know that our lives are fragile and at every moment we may have to face a crisis or a tragedy. That's the nature of our world. What the Passion of Jesus teaches us is that trust in the future grows when we let go of our anxiety about what may lie ahead. New hope is revealed most characteristically when we live through the ups and downs of our lives believing that God is ultimately in control. Every Eucharist is a celebration of our trust that in Christ, meaning will triumph in ways that as yet we cannot guess or anticipate, but which will often come through experiences that we find particularly challenging.

The sort of power that Jesus reveals, the power of vulnerable, suffering Love, may appear puny and ineffective when we are faced with the might of this world, the power of status, force, money. So if we want to demonstrate the particular character of the Gospel of hope, we will need to be creative and imaginative. In practice, it may be that symbolic actions and acted parables are the most effective ways of conveying its' reality. Small signs can illustrate what the grace of God can do. Think, for example, of that tiny, vulnerable figure in front of the tank in Tiananmen Square. It's an image of the paradox of power and powerlessness which continues to resonate many years on.

So reflect on your own history. What are the stories of new life and hope from within your own experience that mean the most to you? One of mine concerns my sister in law Angela, who was born with a disability called Turner's Syndrome that she

struggled with all her life. Among many other symptoms, it affects growth, so she was a quite small. But she made up for it in the size of her personality. She was a founder member of the Turner's Society that supported those with her disability. She died two years ago, and it was only after her death that we discovered from the many tributes that we received, that she had been travelling up and down the country buttonholing Consultants to start clinics for Turner's sufferers in their hospitals. We became aware that she had had a profound effect on many people's lives, turning her own disability into a creative source for good on behalf of others.

That's one of my own parables of hope. Another is of moving to Crawley, and hearing people talk about the town having no soul, complaining that nothing ever happened there, and describing how people in the rest of Sussex looked down their noses at the place. So a group of people founded a Community Festival to celebrate the town. It gave the many voluntary groups who were quietly doing their stuff under the surface, the chance to come into the open under the Festival umbrella and show what they had to offer. Over the last twenty-five years the Festival has helped to encourage the sense of civic pride and self-esteem that was necessary if the town was to thrive. We value what we celebrate, and we celebrate what we value.

Another particular sign of hope occurred in 1966 when Pope Paul and Archbishop Michael Ramsey met in Rome and in a joint Act of Worship in the Sistine Chapel, affirmed their desire for unity. At the conclusion of the Service, the Pope took off his own Episcopal ring, and gave it to the Archbishop to symbolise the friendship and the hope for the future that they had celebrated together. Ramsay burst into tears and wore the ring for the rest of his life.

Symbols and signs of this kind create community and transform relationships. As people of hope, we need to be stimulating our imaginations and asking ourselves what are the gestures, what are the acted parables, that we can make to help bring people together?

Where do you experience hope in your own life? Give yourself the time and space to reflect on your own story. God has been working within you for many years so you can be certain that there will be signs of hope in your own personal experience –

examples of new shoots springing from dead wood, new beginnings from things that felt like endings. What are they? Recognize and name these examples of hope, and give thanks for them. When you do this you will be amazed how the gospel comes alive.

As Christians we hope for eternity. But eternity is not what happens at the end of time. It is not what happens to us after we die. It begins now, whenever we share God's life, whenever we manage to overcome hatred with love, experience God working within us and around us. Today, as we celebrate the Eucharist as a sacrament of our hope for the Kingdom, we can glimpse this now in our own lives and in the world around us. This Advent, let's continue to pray and work for the final coming of the Kingdom of hope, on earth as in heaven.