

'What I know for sure' about hope
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Matthew 2: 16 – 18
1 Peter 3: 15

I have been reminded this weekend of the question that I took to seminary in 1987. I would like to tell you a story and then share a few reflections about hope.

Some of you know that I lived in a small village in Haiti in the middle of the 1980s. There every year when the seeds are in the ground and before the harvest is called 'the hungry season.' Some people got along alright. But the poorest people eventually have only mangoes to eat, from the unripe green ones to the ones they find rotting on the ground.

I used to attend mass and the Baptist church—in the village you were either Catholic or Baptist. During that time, Baptist church there was a celebration of the Eucharist. 'I am the bread of life,' the minister announced. There were carefully cut bits of bread and cups of all shapes and sizes that had been brought to share communion. The bread was passed round. I noticed people were watching each other closely, with suspicion. Why do you think that was? I looked harder and realised...people were so hungry they were checking to make sure no one took too much bread.

So the question I took to seminary was this: how can we preach the bread of life to people who are hungry? How can we? How dare we?

I would like to suggest that the same sort of urgency and life and death attaches to the question of hope. I know Ray Davey said that 'If we Christians have nothing to say about reconciliation we have nothing to say.' I believe that is true of hope too. If we Christians have nothing to say about hope, we have nothing to say.

Some of you know I spent many years working at Christian Aid. While I was there, we did research on what keeps people from working for justice in the world. We found some answers we expected, and some surprises. Some people don't care about poverty and injustice, that is true. But some people cared deeply. They didn't act because they were paralysed by a sense of despair, overwhelmed by the vast scale of poverty, and violence and environmental destruction. We tried to address that through writing materials that didn't guilt people into action, but instead tried to explore how God's grace could be pulling us into God's will for the world he loves so much. But that is another story.

Let's talk about hope.

Always be ready to give a reason for the hope that you have. Are you 'ready'? Do you have hope? What is the reason for the hope that you have? (reflection).

I won't ask you to share with a neighbour because the questions are a bit abrupt. And I suspect that there are a lot of you who don't find them easy to answer. But I would like to suggest this: if you find these questions easy, you haven't been paying attention. You have missed the point, even.

In the last few weeks I have been thinking about hope. Friends in our circles and wider circles have faced violence and intimidation. You may have heard that Duncan and Susie received a bullet through their post box a few weeks ago, which seems connected to Duncan's stand for office with the Alliance Party in May. When Susie picked up an envelope on her doormat that had a bullet in it, that was a clear attempt to send a message about the power of violence and death. There are other examples in our close circles and wider. Ronald Vellem tells me that intimidating people about their home on the basis of ethnicity is happening all the time in Northern Ireland, at least twice a month. He and his colleagues at Extern are working with families who face this intimidation and upheavals. Widening the circle even further, last

week, a friend from Iraqi Kurdistan told me how her family had their bags packed to flee to the mountains as Islamic State (ISIS) approached their city. Intimidations and threats of violence are all around. What word of hope have we for any of the places where the threat of violence and death is so strong?

I would like to share some reflections with you now with three headings.

The first heading is this: If hope is the answer, what is the question?

Second, my own answer for the reason for the hope that I have.

Third, Three things I know for sure about hope. Some of you know I really like the Oprah magazine; there is always a section at the end called 'What I know for sure.' Me and Oprah.

First, if hope is the answer, what is the question?

Well I would like to suggest that to be of any use at all the question has to start at the scene where Rachel is weeping for her children, and refuses to be consoled. We know the story of Herod who was so threatened and insecure in his power that he killed babies to protect it.

Here I invite you to notice that the Gospel writer is imagining a scene of what we could call unspeakable violence. He has no words to describe it. So he reaches back further into a more ancient story of violence and death from Hebrew scriptures, what we know as the book of Jeremiah.

Just notice a couple more things. When we have no words to meet situations we reach back for the old words too. I recently found a book my father would have used just for funerals: the death of a child, a youth, a public figure. We need to reach for the old words sometimes.

Notice one more thing. The litany of modern places where mothers weep for their children is very very long. Say we ignore the 3000 or so years since Rachel was weeping for her children and just start in the 1970s. Cambodia: The Democratic Republic of the Congo. where at least 7 million people have been killed since 1998. Iraq, Bosnia, Rwanda, Bosnia, Kosovo, Syria, Egypt, Libya (Anywhere else? Mexico. Afghanistan.)

Make no mistake, unless we squarely face questions of life and death, we don't really have a word of hope to offer. So, If hope is the answer, what is the question? I would like to suggest the question is this: how do we live, when the power of death is so strong?

Moving to the second heading: what my answer is for the hope that I have.

The reason for the hope that I have is 'love as strong as death.'

I heard this phrase in a very unlikely place. Last Sunday in church we ended the service with the hymn, 'At the Name of Jesus.' (Who knows what comes next? '...Every knee shall bow, every tongue proclaim him King of Glory now'...Thank you.) At verse 3 or 4, there this great phrase: a love AS strong AS death. It struck me, maybe because I didn't respond so much to the other parts of the hymn.

Usually we find it very easy to say 'Gods love is stronger than death.' That makes it very easy to leave that all up to God. But if I say, by contrast, love AS strong AS death...doesn't that just pull me in? Doesn't that just give me a decision to make, today and everyday about how I am going to **live**? To me to believe in love as strong as death means we have to work at it, everyday.

And so that's the reason for the hope that I have: A love AS STRONG AS death.

So I have suggested that if hope is the answer, the question is how we **live** when the power of **death** is so strong. The reason for the hope I have is love that is **AS strong as death**.

So finally, the third heading. I would like to follow Oprah, and share with you 'what I know for sure' about hope. Hope in love that is as strong as death.

First: Hope is a decision. My Methodist and Anglican friend, the poet Janet Morley noticed that we take it every time we conduct a funeral service in the Presbyterian tradition. "You call it 'A Service of Witness to the Resurrection,' she said. 'In the face of death, that is an act of defiance. Sometimes in the teeth of the evidence.'"

Hope is a decision. It can be an act of defiance.

Second, hope is an action verb. It is dynamic, to hope is to do. This is a natural response. When you start with the question of how to live when death is so powerful, when the reason for your hope is love that is as strong as death, action follows. How can you not be pulled further into God's will for the world? To hope is an action verb.

Hope is a decision, sometimes an act of defiance. To hope is an action verb.

And finally, hope is freely available but it does not come cheap.

If you find hope easy, as I said at the start, you have not been paying attention. You have not sat with someone long enough. You haven't listened closely enough. You have not cried hard enough. You have not been angry enough at injustice. If you start with the right question and you face it squarely, you will hear and see some unbearable things.

Here what I know for sure: Hope starts by looking steadily at reality. It goes straight through the middle of despair. Then it is pulled into God's will for the world God loves so much. Hope is freely available. But it does not come cheap.

We can remember, for example, that Corrymeela started in another place where Rachel was weeping for her children and refused to be comforted. We stand in the tradition of Ray Davey, who started a new chapter of his life when he through the ruins of Dresden. Unbearable. ...unspeakable. He went on to live a mighty life, powered by a mighty love, a love as strong as death. By his example, we see what it may mean to be ready with a reason for hope, to affirm as the reconciling power of God in Jesus Christ, and to celebrate the promise of life as in the Commitment we renew every year.

I know this tradition is alive and well among us at Corrymeela from conversations even yesterday. Tim Page told me he is exploring hope in his writing. Heather Hanna is taking her tenth Habitat for Humanity group of young people abroad, this time to El Salvador. She told me how she tries to explore with the groups, themes of grace and hope. I am sure there are many examples among us. The invitation and challenge to each of us is to do that work in the places we are.

Here is what I know for sure: the reason for the hope that we have is love as strong as death, a response to God's love that overcomes death, Hope is a decision. Hope can be an act of defiance. To hope is an action that pulls us into God's will for the world. And finally, hope is freely available.

But it is not cheap.