



**A sermon preached in December 2013,
during St Chad's Christmas Tree Festival,
by the Right Reverend Ronnie Bowlby**

'HOPE'

Some years ago, I was asked to help a community of nuns in Yorkshire to think about their future. For many years, they had provided a home for children taken into care, but this work was coming to an end. Their numbers were dwindling, as with many religious communities at the time; in particular, some of the sisters who should have been moving into positions of leadership were leaving, deeply frustrated by the reluctance of older sisters to agree to any changes in their way of life. 'What was right for our founder is right for us' seemed to be the ruling assumption.

I had two colleagues to assist me in working through the many difficulties facing this community. One had been the Mother Superior of another community which had begun to make considerable changes to their worship and balance of activities, with very positive results, and she knew what it was like to be a nun. The other was a Mirfield father who already knew the members of the community well, as their chaplain, and who was a trusted guide.

Towards the end of our time together, he gave a short address about facing the future, and I have always remembered the text from one of the Psalms (39, v.8: "And now, Lord, what is my hope? Truly my hope is only in you.") Historically, the original Psalm would have been addressed to Israelites who were facing conflict and uncertainty about their future as a people, and were tempted to seek the help of pagan deities or foreign powers like Egypt in the South. To them, the Psalmist says "Turn back to the God who has sustained you in a wonderful way in the past, and put your trust in Him alone." "The future is going to be different and difficult, but do not get stuck in the past. The present and the future belong to God just as much as the past. That is the ground of your hope.

The application of this to the sisters' situation was not difficult to make. Of course, the future seemed very uncertain, and might even involve the death of the community. But meanwhile, accept the need for change, learn from others' experience, above all hold it all before God, and be as open as you can to the leading of the spirit.

We have been hearing a lot about hope during this season of Advent. The readings remind us of the original hopes of the Israelites, pointing to the coming of a Messiah who would in some way lead his people into a new world free of foreign domination; where everyone lived peacefully together: in the vision of people like Isaiah - a sort of heaven on earth.

When, as Christians believe, the Messiah **did** come, it was not at all what was expected. He was rejected by most Jews, ignored by others, and suffered a terrible death. Yet despite this, new life emerged, and there quickly grew up the expectation that Jesus would come again to complete what he had begun, and next time, it would be a much more triumphant affair, as the OT prophecies had foretold. A new hope was born, and so our Advent readings are a mixture of references to a first coming and a second coming of the Messiah. The important point for us to grasp is that both are focussed on God acting in his own time and in ways which may seem mysterious and unexpected, and this in turn seems to depend in some measure on us.

Hope is therefore about trust in action. I trust God to help us find a way through all the obstacles which are preventing His love from being given full scope in a divided and deeply selfish world.

Such hope operates on a number of different levels.

First, there is the personal hope that there is new life beyond the crematorium. When Jesus was asked about this, he replied rather enigmatically "In my Father's house are many resting places". More powerfully, He himself rose from the dead and spent some time among His disciples in a different form. The historical evidence for this is really quite strong. So there is hope for us in our personal pilgrimage, centred on the risen Christ.

Second, there is hope for the church, despite all its failures and divisions. But only if we become better at trusting God the Holy Spirit to show us how to be more open, more trusting. I have lived long enough to see astonishing changes, notably through the second Vatican Council, but also in countless smaller ways in all the different churches and congregations. Hope learns to look for ways of understanding differences and reaching behind them to the one God who unites us all. An example of this would be the recent willingness of almost all the members of General Synod to find a better way of holding together as the Church of England moves to welcome women as Bishops.

And then, third, hope has a social or political dimension. We are much less good at recognising this, not least because it makes strong demands on us now as well. Running through both Old and New Testaments is the constant hope that God will bring about a new kind of life together on this planet as well and not just in some kind of life hereafter. The great OT prophets like Amos, Isaiah and Jeremiah hammered home the message that God expects us to do justly, walk humbly, be merciful, a message reinforced by the teaching of Jesus in many ways.

And what might that mean?

I end with two examples. In the past 30 years, the gap between the very rich and the least well paid in this country has widened, yet we have prospered as a country. There is a growing shortage of what is called affordable housing of a good standard. When I was first ordained, I lived in a town where many newly married couples (and it was 'marriage' then!) could expect to have a home of their own within about 15 months, But now it is more like 15 years for some, yet the voice of protest is very low. Most churchgoers vote for low taxes, both national and local, and that means hardships for some families and a continuing decline in social wellbeing. "Too bad", we think to ourselves, "someone else's problem". That makes a mockery of Christian hope.

The second example has been hitting us in the news during the last two weeks: Nelson Mandela. He, like Martin Luther King before him and many others, knew that trusting God hopefully meant taking his call to justice to mean finding a new way for people to live together very seriously, especially

where race was concerned. If that meant enduring prison for years, so be it. Sometimes great sacrifices must be made in pursuit of a vision and they are undergirded by a deeply courageous hope, and that hope shines out most strongly in the life of Christ himself.

Let these pretty Christmas trees and lights speak to us of such hope; light in darkness. As St Theresa once wrote; “we must act as though everything depended on us; we must hope as though everything depended on God.”

Ronnie Bowlby, 15 December 2015