

Hope: Romans 8.18-28

Growing Community - Talk 3

Introduction

Recap on our series on Romans

- This term we have been looking at a few themes from the letter to the Romans – looking at the essential characteristics of a healthy, growing community at the heart of Brighton.
- We have looked at Identity – the importance of seeing ourselves as those who are loved by God. And we have looked at Commitment – the importance of sticking with one another – praying for one another, thanking God for one another.
- This evening we are going to be looking at Hope.

The importance of hope

- The American pastor Rick Warren said this about Hope.
'We can survive three weeks without food. We can survive three days without water. We can survive three minutes without air. But we can't survive three seconds without hope. We need hope to cope.'
- The three theological virtues that Paul lists in 1 Corinthians 13 are faith, hope and love. You cannot be a Christian without faith. You cannot be a Christian without love. And you cannot be a Christian without hope.
- Just as you can sum up Christianity with the words 'faith' or 'love' – you can also sum up Christianity with the word 'hope'.
- The French writer Charles Peguy, says that the relationship between these virtues is like that of three sisters holding hands, with hope the youngest and smallest in the middle, in between love and faith. But on closer inspection it becomes clear that hope is pulling the other two sisters along. Hope is what pulls love and faith.

What is hope?

- There is a natural hope. Hope that things will turn out ok. Hope that the weather will get better, that we won't miss out train, that we'll get what we wanted for Christmas. This is Hope as wishful thinking – hoping that things will turn out the way we want them to.
- But this is not Christian hope. Christian hope is holding onto a different reality.

- In Romans 5 Paul says two things about hope which seems strange.
- First he says that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. The process starts with suffering and ends with hope. Paul is saying that hope leads from suffering.
- This seems to be the opposite of our experience. When things go wrong, when we get ill, or are disappointed, we *lose* hope.
- Then, even stranger Paul concludes that 'hope does not disappoint us.' But hope seems to be exactly the thing that disappoints us.

Example: Because the England football team played so well in the run up to last year's World Cup there was real hope that this time might be different, and that made our terrible performance so much more disappointing.

- If we hope for good weather, we are disappointed when it rains. If we hope for good exam results, or a successful piece of work, then we open ourselves the disappointment. It would seem that the best way to avoid disappointment is not to hope, but always expect the worse.
- But Paul insists that Hope comes from suffering and that hope does not disappoint us. And this means that Christian hope must be radically different from any natural source of hope.
- Christian Hope is something supernatural.
- Christian Hope is something that comes in the midst of our suffering and pain.
- Worldly hope disappears in the midst of suffering. Christian hope emerges in the context of suffering.
- Christian hope is confident hope. It does not disappoint.
- Paul keeps on repeating the phrase 'we know' in relation to hope.
- Worldly hope is wishful thinking; Christian hope is certainty.
- It is a gift from God which transforms our sufferings, and protects us from disappointment.
- That is because Christian Hope is based on three things.

Hope in a person

- Christian hope is based on a person not on circumstances.
- The content of Christian hope is defined in verse 28: 'We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him and who have been called according to his purpose.'
- Our hope is that *God* is at work.
- We hope in a person.
- This does not mean that we do not hope for things in this world – we hope for friends to become Christians, for healing, for the transformation of Brighton, for the healing of society.

- But the *basis* of our hope is a person. And it is this that gives us confidence.
- In the book of Daniel three Jews, called Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, are ordered to bow before the statue of the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar or else be thrown into a furnace. And this is what they say: 'If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. *But even if he does not*, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.'
- In other words they have hope that God will rescue them, but their hope is not dependent on being rescued. Their hope transcends circumstances, because it is based on a person.

Hope and the Resurrection

- Hope is based on a person. Secondly, it is based on an event.
- Our hope is based on the resurrection of Jesus.
- During his earthly ministry Jesus preached a lot about love and faith, but never about hope.
- The reason is that hope comes from the resurrection.
- After the resurrection the thing that marks the church is this extraordinary hope.
- For the resurrection turns the worst event in the history of the world – the crucifixion of the most perfect human being in the history of the world, the execution of the Son of God who loved the world and created the world – into something that was good.
- The resurrection shows us that the cross was not a defeat but a victory.
- It also shows that God can turn the worst things in the world into the best things.
- It shows that God turns every pain, and hurt, and sin, and disaster into something that is good.
- And the resurrection shows us that God has defeated even death. Not even death can separate us from the love of God.
- This gives us all the hope of resurrection – new life forever with God.
- This event, the resurrection of Jesus, is the source of our hope.

Hope and the Spirit

- The third basis of our hope is the Holy Spirit.
- Paul says, in verse 23 that 'we have the first fruits of the Spirit' which is what enables us to wait in hope for our redemption.
- The Spirit gives us hope because the experience of the Spirit is like a down payment, guaranteeing what is to come.

- Hope is a work of the Spirit, just like love and faith, and we need to ask God to fill us with his hope.
- This is really important when we think about hope – for hope needs guidance if it is to be genuine hope – for the Spirit shows us what we should hope for.

Example: For example, I have always wanted to play cricket for England. And it is true that I once played for the first eleven at my school when several people happened to be injured. And I have never given up hope of playing for England, even though it looks unlikely at the moment. However, this does not seem to be inspired by the Spirit, but by my own self-delusion.

- We need the Spirit to guide us what to hope for and what to give up on (though we hold onto the fact that God is at work for our good even in this situation).
- Really hope needs to be inspired by the Spirit.

Universal Hope

- This hope is universal in its scope.
- This is our hope: that God is working in every situation – in every tragedy, and disappointment, every success and every failure, in our work and our rest, in our relationships and in our thoughts and in our emotions to bring about good for us.
- There is no part of our life, no situation that we face, and no part of the world where God is not at work to bring about good for us.

Conclusion on the nature of Hope

- So Christian hope is based on a person – it is hope in God; it is based on an event – the resurrection of Jesus; it is a work of the Spirit – the Spirit works in our hearts to give us hope and guides our hopes; and it is a universal hope – that God is at work in *all things* to bring about good for those that love him.

The Effect of Hope

- Having this kind of hope transforms the way we live in all kinds of different ways.
- In this passage we see three things that this kind of hope transforms.

1. Hope gives us Perspective

- One of the things that happens when we experience tragedies and disappointments is that we lose perspective.

(Maybe give an example from your own life.)

- The first thing that hope does for us is transform our perspective.

- Paul says, in verse 18, 'I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.'
- In other words hope has changed the way that he sees his suffering, because he sees them in the context of hope.
- This does not mean that our sufferings are not real and painful.
- Paul knew what it was like to suffer. He was imprisoned, stoned, shipwrecked, flogged, hunted, sleep-deprived, overworked and rejected.
- But Paul sees all these things in the context of what is to come.
- The analogy that Paul uses is that of childbirth.
- Childbirth is incredibly painful (**You may want to insert here whether you know this by experience or by report**) but it is experienced within the context of the great joy of expecting a child.
- Whatever we go through, painful and confusing though it may be, must be seen from the perspective of what God has in store for us.
- The resurrection promises us that suffering or death do not have the final word.
- God has incredible things in store for each one of us in this life and in the life to come.
- Hope gives us an eternal perspective.

2. Hope gives us Perseverance

- The natural thing to do when things go wrong and we get hurt is to give up.
- However Hope enables us to keep going.

Example: In the second Lord of the Rings film, *The Two Towers*, there is a scene in which the people of Rohan are waiting at Helm's Deep as this enormous army of orcs approaches to demolish them. There is a young boy waiting with the army utterly terrified. The hero, Strider goes up to him and asks him his name, and he tells him. Then he says to Strider, 'The men say that we will not outlive the night. They say that there is no hope.' And Strider takes the boy's sword, looks at it, and hands it back saying, 'This is a good sword.' Then he looks into his eyes and says, 'There is always hope.' Then they get ready for the battle.

- Hope enables us to keep going.
- It stops us giving up.
- Isaiah says, 'Even youths grow tired and weary and young men stumble and fall; 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.'

- It gives us the perseverance we need to carry on.
- Father Raniero Cantalamessa, the preacher to the Pope's household, says that, 'to hope means to have faith that "this time" things will be different even if we have believed the same thing hundreds of times in vain.'
- Hope gives us perspective and it gives us perseverance.

3. Hope transforms our Prayers

- The third thing that hope does is it transforms our prayers.
- Paul says that 'we do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.'
- In other words we need the Spirit to inspire and inhabit our prayers.
- We need hopeful prayers – prayers which are inspired by the hope that God has given to us.
- This is how we try to pray at St Peter's. Instead of just praying for our problems or things we are working on (valid as these prayers are), we try to pray with a vision of how things could be.
- We pray *with hope* for a city transformed by the love of God; for homelessness to be eradicated, community re-established, God's name honoured, the churches full, marriages restored, people healed, addicts set free and lives transformed.
- We need to do the same in our prayers for ourselves – to pray with hope for our marriages, our relationships, our work, our dreams.

Conclusion

- Hope is not at all natural, but this is what makes it so powerful.
- According to G. K. Chesterton, the Christian virtues are the irrational virtues: 'Love means pardoning the unpardonable, or it is no virtue at all. Faith means believing the incredible, or it is no virtue at all. And hope means hoping when all is hopeless, or it is no virtue at all.'
- Charles Peguy imagines God looking down at us and saying, 'Hope is what fills me with wonder. That those poor creatures see how things are going and believe that tomorrow it will go better surprises me.'
- Hope is indeed something wonderful, and it transforms our perspective on our lives and the world around us, it gives us perseverance in the midst of suffering and disappointment, and it transforms our prayers.

- No matter what we are facing we need to hold onto the hope that 'in all things God works for the good for those who love him and are called according to his purpose.'