



Finding God in a Culture of Fear

Discovering hope in God's kingdom

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Hope that is seen is no hope at all.
Who hopes for what they already have?
But if we hope for what we do not yet have,
we wait for it patiently.

ROMANS 8:24-25

1

An introduction

God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them. We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, so that what you hope for may be fully realised. We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.

HEBREWS 6:10–12

Hope is being able to see, despite all of the darkness.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu

This is a survival handbook.

This is a survival handbook for those of us who feel overwhelmed by the world we live in. For those of us who are afraid of any one of the myriad different things: debt, death, failure, annihilation, anonymity – even the ubiquitous ‘fear of missing out’ that just makes life so exhausting. It’s a book for those of us living with the realisation that life is just a little bit broken. Or quite a lot broken. It’s a book for those of us who are angry about the status quo and know that there is much more to life than this; isn’t there?

This is a survival handbook for those of us who have given up on the self-help section of the library, because the books there aren’t providing the answers to the questions I can’t quite articulate or identify yet.

This is a survival handbook for anyone who is searching for an alternative view to the fragmentation of the 21st century. It offers a hope-filled resistance to fear, despair, decay and devastation.

This is your invitation to discover a gospel of hope and to live a life of hopeful resistance. Hope can be defined as living in the expectation that something will happen. There is something deeper within Christian hope; the consequences of God's design, Jesus' resurrection and the Spirit's work in the world are already happening in the present. Christian hope is grounded in our present, everyday experience, and it relies on the actions of a loving God. Our response to this is an opportunity to participate in bringing God's future into reality. Hope requires action in response; it is not apathetic.

The opposite of hope is not hopelessness; it's fear and despair. The world we live in is marked by fear. As I write this, counterarguments to Brexit are described as 'Project Fear'. British security has never been on higher alert, as we are gripped by the real and present danger of imminent terror attacks. Journalists are continually caricatured as promoting a 'fake news' agenda, designed to terrify the masses, themselves becoming physical targets. Our bodies are constantly in a state of anxiety, with high levels of cortisol and adrenalin causing long-term damage to our physical and mental well-being. The world is getting hotter – politically and through global warming. Pension pots are running low as the population age rises, and in turn those far from retiring fear the lack of provision. And, if creation catastrophe, global politics, political philosophy, propaganda, terror threat and our own physiology is not enough to stop us leaving our homes, we become crippled by our personal fear of failure.

How (literally) on earth do we find hope – or even God – in an age of fear? How do we survive? What are we hoping for, and how do we try to enable it to happen?

This book challenges our preprogrammed acceptance that the world is a scary, meaningless, ultimately painful place – a place from which

we are looking for some sort of escape. This book presents instead a vision of the world that God both intended to bring and is bringing into fruition: a world of invitation and opportunity, of relationship and beauty; a world of mystery and (re)creativity, where the people of God are once again at the forefront of discovery and are the embodiment of hopeful resistance.

The context we live in is a fearful one, fuelled by influences both within and outside of our control. But this is not the end of the story; it is the start of a rediscovery of the story of grace, stitched into the fabric of the universe. Fear should not, and does not, have the final word, despite our predisposition to listen to its power and to be tempted and cajoled by its influence on our lives and our world. Scripture says, 'Perfect love drives out fear' (1 John 4:18).

The following chapters are an invitation to explore the deeper mystery of hope, which in turn brings us face-to-face with the nature of God, the character of Jesus, the playfulness of the Holy Spirit, the promise of the future and the present/future potential of the community of the Christian church. Each chapter uses biblical roots to explore hopeful resistance in an age of fear. This is then followed by a series of questions, which are intended for your own use or as a small group study resource. Hopeful resistance is not an individual pursuit, so you may want to read this book with a group of friends, in order to help you discern your calling in God's world.

Chapter 2 sets us on course, offering a description of the UK in the 21st century and an explanation of why such lived experience may perpetuate a culture of fear. If we are to live a life of hopeful resistance, another world must surely be possible. In order to discern the future, however, we must understand our past and our present. The premise of this book is that we are living in a culture of fear. As institutions crumble, living hopefully can be nigh impossible. This chapter begins to notice what a hope-filled existence might look like in a culture of fear.

Chapter 3 begins by searching for God's identity within a culture of fear and anxiety. Experiencing the 21st century can be like living through the pain and despair of an exile. This chapter explores this metaphor, and it begins to identify biblical models of response to this experience: subversion, exclusivism, assimilation and vision. The consequence of an exilic experience is that it is easy to both blame and deny God. This chapter seeks to explore how these four models of response enable us to notice God's character amid the chaos. Hope is ultimately found in the loving compassion of the creator God. The exilic experiences enable us to identify this even in times when everything else evaporates.

Chapter 4 asks what sort of future we are looking for. Christian hope is caricatured as a simple argument about what happens when people die. It becomes limited to an after-life conversation, rather than a before-death invitation to change the world. This chapter explores an organic response to the two questions, 'What happens when I die?' and 'Why did Jesus die?' To live hopefully is to nurture an understanding of the gospel that is ecologically sound.

Chapter 5 moves from a vision of the future to a more grounded exploration of Jesus' ministry. The gospels provide examples of Jesus' participation in the messier parts of life. Jesus' encounters with people are tactile and personal. He challenges those who exclude people on the basis that they are making a mess (of the law, of the local community or of the geopolitics of the time), and he goes out of his way to eat with diverse dining companions. Jesus' model of hopeful resistance is one of healing, boundary crushing and bread breaking. In turn, we are called to get our hands and feet messy too. This is 'messy church' at its richest, rawest and best.

Chapter 6 explores what hope looks like in the age of the Spirit. Hopeful resistance in the power of the Holy Spirit is about discovering the divine flow that transforms all things. It takes seriously the fact that the Holy Spirit is engaging in the world and transforming it for the better. The Spirit turns the world upside down. Hope is present

in the here and now, and it will take patience and courage to lean into the divine flow.

Chapter 7 explores the vocation of the church as an active community of hope, and it begins to imagine what our future calling might be. If we are to discover hope for ourselves, and if we are to risk living hopefully today, what might be the implications of this for the ways in which we offer God's love to a hurting and fearful world? How might a cultural revolution continue to bubble up in resistance to the despair and spiritual poverty of our society?

May we find God in a culture of fear. May we explore together ways of receiving hope afresh and, in turn, find ways to live lives of hopeful resistance: lives lived with the divine command to get involved and to change the world for the better, right here, right now.

For God's sake, as well as our own.

5

Getting our hands and feet dirty

May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.

2 THESSALONIANS 2:16–17

For Christians, hope is ultimately hope in Christ. The hope that he really is what for centuries we have been claiming he is. The hope that despite the fact that sin and death still rule the world, he somehow conquered them. The hope that in him and through him all of us stand a chance of somehow conquering them too. The hope that at some unforeseeable time and in some unimaginable way he will return with healing in his wings.

Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking* (Collins, 1972)

Getting our feet wet

It was meant to be a fun family day out, as we and a group of friends headed to an interactive museum. What hadn't been planned for was that, although the day was fine, there had been torrential rain the previous night, so there were puddles everywhere. Thus it came to pass that, almost immediately at the entrance, the toddler met *the* puddle. A determined run-up was followed by an enormous splash.

The toddler, now caked in mud, laughed gleefully as the muddy gloop rose over her wellies and up to her knees. Needless to say, the splashing continued. It was impossible to move her from the entertainment of the puddle. No amount of coaxing, bribery, threat or attempts at physical eviction was successful. We had only got as far as the entrance to the venue! Dripping from head to toe, without a single item of dry clothing remaining, the toddler continued to content herself with the childlike delight of the muck and mud of a single, giant (even to an adult) puddle at the entrance to the open-air museum.

It may not have been the best example of parenting I have exhibited, but I eventually gave up trying to coax the toddler away, and instead opted for the watchful-eye-with-a-mug-of-tea approach. In that moment, the toddler taught me the importance of childlike playfulness. Sometimes joy and a hopeful resistance to fear are found when we dive right in, when we willingly choose to be courageous and get our hands and feet dirty.

Walking in our shoes

In Auschwitz, there is a large room with glass cabinets on either side of a walkway. The room is part of one of the former dormitories. In each cabinet, filled almost two-thirds of the way to the roof, are thousands upon thousands of shoes. They are the shoes of the men, women and children who died during the Holocaust.

At the turn of the last century, the UK received over 1,000 refugees from the war-torn area around Kosovo. Initially received into a central location, arriving with nothing, the families were eventually housed in communities across the country. As a volunteer with that project, I heard time and time again that one of the most difficult things that those most vulnerable people endured was learning to walk in shoes that had belonged to someone else – compassionately donated, indiscriminately passed out and not quite fit for purpose.

From the sanctuary roof in St James' Church, Piccadilly, installation artist Arabella Dorman hung over 700 items of clothing – including shoes – all salvaged from the wreckage of boats eventually run aground on the Greek island of Lesbos. Each item is a symbol of the vain hopes of desperate refugees attempting to enter Europe.

In March 2018, campaigners placed 7,000 pairs of shoes in the grounds of Capitol Hill in the USA, as a silent protest representative of all the children who had lost their lives in gun crimes since the Sandy Hook massacre six years previously.

In May the same year, campaigners for the 'millions missing' campaign placed pairs of shoes in public spaces in 95 cities around the world, calling for greater understanding and action to support those who live with ME. The campaign continues to highlight the challenges faced by those living with the condition, and those who have been discriminated against due to a lack of research, medical investment and understanding of the condition. Each pair of shoes represented someone housebound because of ME.

The incarnation of Jesus has been poetically summarised as 'God walking in our shoes'. It can be easy to reduce this sentiment to images of catwalks and sneakers. However, the idea that Jesus walks in our shoes is far more visceral, transformative and countercultural when stated alongside the experiences noted above. Jesus brought hope into the world because he knew that the world had the potential to be a terrifying place. Jesus 'moved into the neighbourhood' (John 1:14, MSG) to show that there is hope within the human experience, not despite it. Jesus' being 'God with skin on' brings hope that the divine knows our despair, dramas, fears and shame – and has the intent, power, creative imagination and loving care to do something about it.

If Jesus does walk in our shoes, it means that Jesus was walking in the shoes of the Auschwitz resident as they walked down the staircase to the gas showers. It means that Jesus walked in the shoes

of the refugees, feet bloodied from their already lengthy journey and then feeling the excruciating pain of seawater on sores. And Jesus was present with those drowned beneath the waves whose shoes washed up on the shore. It means that Jesus was with those children for whom school was not a safe place, and where bullets prematurely cut short their lessons and their lives. It means that Jesus knew the difficulty of walking in shoes that didn't fit.

In this chapter, we will explore Jesus' ministry in terms of his participation in the world, offering hope to those who needed it most. Christian hope is to be found in the person of Jesus: both present gift and future salvation. In turn, hope is to be put into practice, as we too are called to get our hands and feet dirty. We are called to dive into the messier area with delight and playfulness, as well as solidarity.

At first glance, being born in unusual family circumstances, in the stable of a busy hostel, is not the most auspicious entrance for the Saviour of the world to have made. His first crib was a feeding trough, and it's safe to assume that even the best keeper of stable-dwelling animals would not have expected the straw-strewn floor to be clean. Jesus was born to a poor family, tended to in an outside shed and visited by a ragamuffin band of untrustworthy night workers – not to mention a caravan of stargazers who couldn't quite believe that the stars were pointing to this bizarre palace.

Suffice it to say that Jesus was surrounded by a lot of muck, even in his early years. From the sewage in a used stable to the sawdust of Joseph's workshop, Jesus was familiar with mess and muck and mire. Even his death – crucified on the local rubbish heap – acts as a reminder that Jesus modelled a humanity and a humility that was gritty and unafraid of contamination. Through Jesus' hope-bringing participation in the world, God shows that relationship is not meant to be one of clinical sterility – something obtained in isolation away from the dirt and grime of the world – but forged within the difficulties and puddles of life. Jesus offers hope to people who feel

tarnished or excluded from society because their lives are messy. Jesus offers hope to those who are contaminated in some way, going out of his way to touch them, talk to them and pull up a pew and eat with them. Jesus offers hope to victims. Ultimately, Jesus offers a hope which declares that however frightening and hopeless the present situation appears, the worst thing is never the last thing. Not even death is the end of the story.

Frederick Buechner, in *The Final Beast* (HarperCollins, 1982), provocatively notes:

The worst isn't the last thing about the world. It's the next to the last thing. The last thing is the best. It's the power from on high that comes down into the world, that wells up from the rock-bottom worst of the world like a hidden spring. Can you believe it? The last, best thing is the laughing deep in the hearts of the saints, sometimes our hearts even. Yes. You are terribly loved and forgiven.

Jesus' life and death intentionally show that there is hope, even in the worst-case scenario; that the worst thing is never the last thing; that relationship with God and with a wider community of people is not only possible but is also the preferred way of the kingdom of God. In Jesus we find a God-human who desires the whole of humanity to know it is both terribly loved and totally forgiven.

Jesus got his hands and his feet dirty, and time and time again engaged in practices and rituals that unearthed a divine revelation in the midst of the muck. Jesus was not afraid of mess, nor was he reserved in his approach to people who were different from him. This pragmatic and textured aspect to Jesus' life remains undeveloped in 21st-century thinking about the life of Jesus – and yet, as a model of engaged, relational, authentic living, it perhaps gives us the greatest clue about the nature of the kingdom of God, the hope which Jesus brings and the life to which we are thus called.

There are three areas of Jesus' ministry that offer hope to those Jesus encountered, and in which we find a model of world-changing engagement: dirt, debate and dinner.

Dirt

To those who were excluded from relationship and wider society, Jesus' approach was very tactile and visceral. Jesus was not afraid of getting involved with people who were the epitome of messy – those with open sores, women who were bleeding, the dead. Jesus gave hope to those whom society had written off.

Jesus *touched* those who were sick or in need of help. This contravened convention and good order. Jesus was willing to put his own health, welfare and safety below that of those he was engaging with. For example, Jesus touched a number of lepers in a range of circumstances. He was not afraid of the belief that leprosy could be transmitted through touch. Instead, he offered those who were made to feel anxious in community and forced to wear identification of their disease a moment of humanity and a physical connection that they had long forgotten.

Jesus' touch was also a source of healing and wholeness for those needing hope and healing. The woman who had an embarrassing and painful gynaecological problem (Mark 5:25–34; Luke 8:43–48) touched the hem of Jesus' clothing and was healed. Jesus had not instigated conversation with her, and the disciples hadn't even noticed that she had approached them. However, healing occurred, a connection was made and the worst thing was not the last thing. In this story, Jesus was taken by surprise, and a brave woman's life was forever changed.

Hope and healing are not only offered to those who deserve them or who are powerful enough to feel entitled to them. Even with the most excluded and marginalised people, on numerous occasions

Jesus refused to conform to expectations, and healing came through physical encounter and touch. This includes those who were demon possessed and friends who were sick or dying (or, in the case of Lazarus, already dead), and it is crucial in the case of a paralysed man who is not only touched by Jesus but is manhandled on to a rooftop before being told to pick up his mat and walk for the first time in decades.

On three separate occasions – with a deaf and mute man, an unnamed blind man and a blind man named Bartimaeus – Jesus used a combination of touch and spit, and for Bartimaeus even mud, to bring about their restoration. There is evidence to suggest that this mirrored a practice from some of the other magic workers and faith-healers of the day, so this was perhaps not as strange as it seems to a contemporary reader. This demonstrates not only that Jesus told stories which incorporated local knowledge but also that he used the practices employed by others in order to bring healing, hope and transformation out of the mire of despair and hopelessness.

Hopeful resistance makes the mundane holy. By being tactile, as well as incorporating quasi-medical techniques from the ancient world, Jesus offered hope to those who had been let down in the past by medical professionals and by wider society. He treated people with dignity and respect and took the opportunity to build a connection and a relationship with those whom the rest of society were seeking to exclude. Jesus was not afraid of getting ‘dirty’ – be that literal or metaphorical.

In 1987, Diana Princess of Wales caused an international outcry when she touched and kissed a young boy diagnosed with HIV without any form of barrier or protection. It was an image that defined her and has changed the way HIV care has developed over the subsequent decades.

Touch offers hope to those who are at the powerless mercy of stigma and misunderstanding, especially those with illnesses that can be

difficult to both diagnose and treat. Pastoral touch, and Jesus' more primitive methods of saliva and soil, offer a countercultural vision of God's care and compassion, as well as modelling a pattern of behaviour that is respectful of the dignity and humanity of others. Even before oxytocin was identified as the 'feel-good' hormone, and scientists discovered the physical and psychological benefits of touch, Jesus broke with all social conventions and sought to build people up in the fullness of their humanity.

Debate

Jesus was not afraid to argue with the powerful in defence of those who were contaminated or considered sinful or who were shamed in some, often very public, way. Jesus offers hope to those whom society sought to shame, by honouring them and standing up for them.

When a woman was at risk of being stoned to death because she had been caught in a honeytrap, Jesus didn't participate in the public shaming of the woman. Surrounded by a crowd standing in judgement against her, Jesus bent down and doodled in the dust. Instead of giving those in authority the permission to further abuse the woman's body, Jesus paused and wrote in the sand. Hope was offered to a guilty woman because, as Jesus pointed out, everyone is sinful and could be publicly shamed in the same way as her – but who wants to be in the position of being caught out and becoming the next piece of target practice for the stone-throwers?

Hope never throws the first stone, but stays until the end of the action. The worst thing is never the last thing.

A gatecrasher at a party Jesus was attending took a precious vase of perfume. Its value has been estimated to equate to her dowry. To the chagrin of the watching crowd of invited guests, the woman – often caricatured as being of ill-repute – opened the jar and poured

the ointment over Jesus. The onlookers were uncomfortable and awkward. One friend broke the silence and loudly whispered his distaste at what was happening. If she was to be so profligate with her possessions, then surely the vial could have achieved greater impact if it had been invested or sold, rather than used to anoint Jesus. After all, not even Jesus was worth that much, surely.

Jesus instead showed that hope accepts gifts that are offered. Jesus' willingness to get dirty and to join the debate enabled one disciple to do something about the dirt in return. The aroma of perfume filled a room otherwise soured with sweat and grime. Hope isn't afraid of debate and disagreement – but, like the lingering scent of expensive perfume, it changes the atmosphere of a room. Hope is intimate and vulnerable. The woman could have been humiliated in her act. Instead, Jesus raised her up, acknowledged and received her gift, and blessed her activity. Through a broken vessel, the aroma of hope filled the room – much like Pandora, if you think about it.

Whether she was a serial wife or merely unfortunate, a midday encounter with Jesus at the local watering hole enabled one shamed and disgraced community member to become the first evangelist in town. In the heat of the day, when no one would want to be fetching pails of water, Jesus once again broke all cultural convention: a man meeting with a woman at a deserted location; a single man meeting a several times married woman; a respectable man meeting with a woman whose current personal circumstances meant that she was the source of gossip in the village, a fact underlined by her midday excursion so as to avoid the whispers; a Jew meeting with a Gentile. This encounter should not have happened. Jesus should have done the honourable thing and walked away. If Jesus didn't, then he should at the very least have behaved in a more entitled way. After all, he had the social and cultural upper hand, which is exactly why the woman reacted when Jesus asked her to pour him a drink. Entitled. Patriarchal. A product of the system that said that a man was to be obeyed, no matter the cost – a cost she had likely paid time and time again in her previous relationships. Yet their verbal

sparring quickly turned from bitterness and spite to hope and grace for a woman so often shunned and shamed. Jesus did not leave her as a victim, signed up to an early version of the #metoo campaign. Instead, he offered her the source of life. Hope. He put her right back on track and into the heart of community. Whereas once the woman was pushed aside by her neighbours, this strange encounter at the local well resourced her to rebuild fractured relationships and to regain her identity within her context. People began to take her seriously again. This unnamed woman discovered liberation through living water.

Hope in her midst saw an outcast thrust back into the heart of her community – from the well to the marketplace. Hope did not see a victim of circumstance. Hope took the time to hear a story and offered an alternative ending. There was sparring and a debate – but the result of the discourse was restored relationships, rebuilt confidence and the bubbling spring of the kingdom of God at work.

Throughout scripture, Jesus noticed those who were made to be victims of their own circumstances and, often in controversial and countercultural ways, sided with them against the prosecutors of the day. Jesus publicly debated those in authority and conversed with those who were normally excluded. Jesus offered hope, grace, dignity, humanity and healing to those whom the rest of wider society wanted to exclude, excommunicate and extinguish.

Such actions in Jesus' life are also the vehicle through which Jesus' death and resurrection would provide the ultimate hope for the world. Hope is not afraid of shame or fear or brokenness – but hope also offers a way forward so that victims become survivors. Hopeful resistance challenges the rules and enables those on the margins to be seen, heard, loved.

Jesus turned a debate into the opportunity for people to be heard and for their story to be told in all its vulnerability. It's perhaps no surprise that the connection between storytelling and life-giving

vulnerability is becoming more and more popular in the social sciences and therapeutic communities. Professor Brené Brown in her groundbreaking work in this area describes her discovery:

In the process of collecting thousands of stories from diverse men and women... ranging from eighteen to eighty-seven – I saw new patterns that I wanted to know more about. We all struggle with shame and the fear of not being enough... Many of us are afraid to let our true selves be seen and known. But in this huge mound of data there was also story after story of people living these amazing and inspirational lives... Wholeheartedness is as much about embracing our tenderness and vulnerability as it is about developing knowledge and claiming power.

Brown's conclusion is stark: in order to move from being a victim defined by a story and experience of shame, one needs to embrace vulnerability and to live more compassionately, creatively, connectedly and courageously – more hopefully. Jesus modelled this before it became vogue. Jesus engaged with people in despair and fear, and he enabled them to become powerful survivors, storytellers, disciples and community leaders in their own right, *because* of the hope in their story, not despite it.

Dinner

Hope which is silent is not hope at all. Hope does not sit on the sidelines, waiting for systems to change. Hope is not passive, and the hope that Jesus offered to anyone who would listen was certainly not ignorant of the need for action. In a culture of fear, the temptation is to become anaesthetised to the needs that appear to be everywhere and to become ambivalent to people and situations. Hope dances in puddles and stands up to bullies. Hope pulls up a chair, breaks bread and invites people to feast. Jesus' ministry brought hope through healing, through dialogue and through feasts.

Jesus had a habit of eating with people who were despised and rejected by the locals. Such behaviour did not go unnoticed and did not go down well. Zacchaeus was in the pocket of the Roman officials. A chief tax collector, he was excellent at his job, fiddling the books so that he was able to make the most amount of profit from those under his direction. Why would Jesus want to spend time with someone who had dodgy business ethics and whom everyone else jostled out of the picture?

Resourcefully, Zacchaeus, small in stature and struggling to catch a glimpse of the celebrity Jesus in town, saw his opportunity and climbed a tree as Jesus rode through the town. Jesus was unafraid of political systems, politicians and even the dubious practices of tax collectors in trees. Jesus called Zacchaeus out and, rather forwardly, invited himself to dinner. Once again, Jesus' engagement came with a visceral action – let's eat together and see what happens; let's be equals around a dining table and begin to sketch what a different world view might look like. To the distaste and disappointment of the disbelieving onlooking crowd, Zacchaeus ran home to prepare a meal. Jesus sullied himself in the company of a rogue, and the onlookers were understandably disapproving. The tax collector was tantamount to a thief, yet Jesus decided that he was the person he wanted to meet and the tax system was the thing that he wanted to challenge. Outrageous!

The result of this encounter, however, was that Zacchaeus' transformation began. A new tax code was written. Where people had been defrauded, Zacchaeus paid them back. Where there was injustice, mercy sprang forth. Hope says that not even the political systems of the day are beyond the grasp of grace. Even short people with a penchant for petty larceny are challenged and changed in conversation with Jesus, and in turn, the people were reimbursed for their losses over the years Zacchaeus had been in charge.

Hope is found in broken bread and over a dinner table.

Ultimately, Jesus offers a hope which declares that however frightening and hopeless the present situation appears, the worst thing is never the last thing. Death is not the end of the story.

Two distraught sisters, having trusted that Jesus could change the world, suddenly realised that perhaps Jesus wasn't who they thought he was. Jesus showed up too late to save their brother, so instead of helping his friends, Jesus was faced with their righteous anger. They felt entitled to some of the miraculous interventions that Jesus had shown other people – strangers. Why didn't he show up for his friends like he did for everyone else?

The sisters were angry, upset and full of grief. This sentiment was shared by Jesus, who in a moment of profound emotion, approached the cold, lifeless body of his friend, and wept. The villagers were out in force, offering their own rituals of bereavement. This was not a silent scene, and Jesus' tears were submerged beneath the outpouring of grief around him.

Yet there was something else stirring. The worst thing – death in this case – cannot have the final say. Hope needs to make a home in the place of despair. So Jesus did what he could. He asked for the stone to be rolled away. He risked the stench of death and instead trusted that there was the possibility of a different ending. This was a divinely appointed resuscitation of a recently passed cadaver. Jesus spoke. 'Lazarus come out' echoed around the stone cave where the body had been laid. With that, Lazarus lived, his exit from the tomb still shrouded in the mystery of his grave clothes.

Jesus had received criticism and anger, showed compassion and still offered hope amid the very worst thing. Jesus offered to his closest friends the opportunity to see and trust that whatever was to come in the future, the worst things to come would not be the last things.

Another world is possible. Just wait and see.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.

1 PETER 1:3–4

In the dirt, hope brings healing. In debate, hope restores identity and relationship. At dinner, hope makes things right. In death, hope says it's not the end.

Jesus' ministry was tactile and visceral, messy and countercultural. Through Jesus' model of ministry with the marginalised, poor, disadvantaged and rejected, disciples today are shown how to live as ambassadors of living hope, striving to change the world. Jesus got his hands and his feet dirty. He walked in our shoes and challenged human systems. He called out truth to power and didn't resist opportunities for dialogue, even when his perspectives were so wholly distasteful to his audience.

Fear shies away from engagement. Fear gives way. Fear resists change. Fear doesn't want a different opinion. Fear always makes the world smaller.

Hope, however. Hope eats meals with fraudsters. Hope tells more stories and invites more and more people around the table. Hope challenges the belief that nothing can be done. Hope never lets the worst thing be the last thing, for other people as well as for ourselves. Hope shown in the ministry of Jesus is the model of our discipleship.

Watering the flowers

At 1.00 am on 14 June 2017, a fire ripped through a social housing tower block in the centre of London, killing 72 people and leaving hundreds with life-limiting injuries and ongoing debilitating mental health issues. The devastation caused by the fire, images of which

have become iconic, was the result of decades of catastrophic systematic failure.

Amid the consequent social unrest, political infighting, blame, inquiries, medical appointments and ongoing anger and frustration of residents, hope began to be seen in unexpected places: from the vanloads of goods and gifts being donated to the survivors to the local *Big Issue* seller laying a bunch of flowers (picked from nearby gardens) on a makeshift memorial.

Sometimes, in order to offer hope where there are only questions, there needs to be a simple, prophetic action that cuts through the politics and begins to reach the hearts of those in need – whoever they are. Cathy and Miranda did just this. Two days after the fire was extinguished, the physical ash settling but the embers of emotion beginning to flare, Cathy and Miranda began to water the flowers that had been left in memoriam. Together they spent hours tending to the flowers – and listening to the people who came up to them, just needing to be heard. As the *New Statesman* reported:

‘This is not just a nice display,’ Cathy says while watering the flowers. ‘A lot of people come because they need somebody to talk to, they might need some counselling or they might need some help. Lots of them don’t want to walk into a church but they will always speak to a woman who is tending flowers.’

Cathy (a local clergy spouse) and Miranda got their hands and feet dirty in a community covered in the ashes of tragedy. They got involved: watering the flowers that had been tied to the railings of the devastated building and its surroundings. They were present to the pain of the community, and they listened to the stories of the people when the powerbrokers did not. For a few vital days, hope – Jesus – looked like two women watering the flowers.

Jesus constantly drew crowds, engaged in conversation and challenged authority. He used what was around him to craft stories or

to forge the means of healing. Hope offered through this relational, transformational, system-shaking, world-view-changing example didn't come with a manual or strategy document. Instead, hope whispered in the background, worked in the shadows, brought two women and a watering can to a disaster zone. The hope Jesus offered to his disciples and to us becomes the invitation to get our hands and feet dirty and our prejudices challenged. As the kingdom of God continues to expand, more and more storytellers, story-keepers and flower arrangers (to name but a few) are invited around the table and into the divine dance of Christian hope.

Sometimes hope looks like watering the flowers.

Getting your hands and feet dirty

The theologian Jürgen Moltmann, in *Theology of Hope* (SCM, 2010), explores the difference that this post-crucifixion, living-in-resurrection-technicolour hope offers:

Christian hope is resurrection hope, and it proves its truth in the contradiction of the future prospects thereby offered and guaranteed for righteousness as opposed to death, glory as opposed to suffering, peace as opposed to dissension.

In other words, to the disciples, Jesus says, 'You ain't seen nothing yet.' To the Jesus-follower of today, the promise is the same – this is only part of the story. The worst thing isn't the last thing. Take a walk in my footprints and let's see what hope tomorrow brings with it.

Living in the mess and the dirt can lead to protest and justice. A model of debate and dialogue can lead to solidarity. An open dinner table can inspire creativity and beauty.

Dirt: protest and justice

For far too long, the western Christian church has remained tangled in the tension between conversion evangelism and social-justice action. This dichotomy has been perpetuated over the last century by, on the one hand, well-meaning evangelistic rallies offering a personal salvation plan and, on the other, the rise of liberation theology and a social gospel.

An ‘on earth as it is in heaven’ agenda necessarily sees proclamation and justice as being in partnership with one another. Indeed, they should never have been so acrimoniously divorced in the first place. The hopeful promise of the kingdom of God is a revolutionary one. It’s the very reason Jesus was crucified in the first place – the transformation he offered to a fragile and broken world challenged the power brokers and principalities of his day, as well as the spiritual forces he constantly overthrew. Jesus demonstrated time and time again that God was turning the world upside down and that change was coming from within, not without.

Hope, therefore, finds its place in protest movements, in social-justice campaigns and in the midst of revolutions. Systemic and ethical issues within contemporary society become the vehicle of transformation and an opportunity to live in the kingdom of God, in the here and now – and for that to be a tangible reality for others too. Anti-debt campaigns; climate change and environmental stewardship initiatives; anti-discrimination and anti-abuse campaigns; programmes to care for the homeless and provide food banks – these are not the added extras of church life. Instead, they are the lifeblood of the kingdom.

Justice brings with it conflict and debate. It incites people’s passions on all sides, and it requires determination, courage and compassion to mould anger into productive and tangible results. Justice is a gut-wrenching, blood-sweat-and-tears-inducing, sleepless-night-causing, flag-waving scream from the barricades. Protest speaks up

for the poor and the excluded. It offers love where there is often hate. It caresses despair and enables those vilified to experience dignity. Protest and justice speak up and show up when immigrant children are separated from their parents, or when refugees are turned out of their makeshift shelters in case they are getting too comfortable. Protest and justice say that it shouldn't be like this and that there is a hopeful vision of a future where it isn't.

Hope-filled actions can be small-scale rebellions against the status quo or enormous campaigns for the global good, but they are actions all the same. Living in resurrection hope is about living in the tension that the world is not right but that humanity has the ability to partner with the Spirit in bringing about a revolution of hope.

The heart of the gospel is grounded in the example of Jesus to challenge those in power, to act on behalf of those who are weaker or different, and the call to get involved in a resurrection movement of hope and kingdom-change in the present day.

Hope does not deny the complexity of social, moral and ethical issues. The gospel is always expansive, always open to the influence of the other in order to build relationships and understanding. Another world is possible. It doesn't have to be like this. The worst thing is never the last thing. Resurrection hope looks different from what we know now. Hope provides the courage to stand up, to walk in the shoes of another and to find ways of living and loving in the expanse of the good news of Jesus.

Debate: solidarity and love

Hope in the present circumstances reaches beyond the inevitability of despair and towards a deeper sense of solidarity, both with other humans and with the heavens. Whereas justice has that sense of high-octane, world-changing protest and revolution, solidarity acts as a collaborative counterbalance.

Solidarity sits alongside those in need and listens to their story.

Solidarity speaks wisdom into the silence of hopeless despair, bringing comfort and offering transformation.

Solidarity acts out of personal contemplation and experience, recognising that our own scars of despair and agony can be the source of healing for those wounded in the world's wake.

Solidarity offers the 'balm of Gilead' into the woundedness of the world, declaring that resurrection hope is offered with the open-handed stigmata of crucifixion still raw to the touch.

Solidarity is about our own spiritual lives. Solidarity is also entirely preoccupied with the lived experience of others. It is a flow between the inward and the outward life that is also both entirely present and yet focused on the on-earth-as-in-heaven dimension of the kingdom of God in our daily experience.

Again, this present-here-and-now kingdom-on-earth experience of solidarity is not passive. It is highly engaged, often exhausting and a richly spiritual exercise. Solidarity comes out of a spirituality of presence, practised both as a personal endeavour and as a community of the faithful.

In *Letters from the Desert* (DLT, 1972), the hermit and mystic Carlo Caretto writes:

Love [we may want to add resurrection hope] is the synthesis of contemplation and action, the meeting-point between heaven and earth, between God and humanity.

Caretto, recognising that there is a paradox between this overwhelming sense of participating in justice and spiritual reflexivity, speaks of the need to perceive those 'thin place' moments of heaven touching earth in the here and now. Loving, hopeful action leads to

contemplation, and from contemplation, action and engagement find their energy reserve. There is a flow and a movement between the inner and outer life that is required if one is both to live hopefully and to seek hope in the midst of lived experience. In order to be proactive for the kingdom in the present age, one needs to be a contemplative as well as deeply engaged in the world.

Solidarity, therefore, offers hope in the mix and midst of fear and despair, by enabling an individual to be their best selves, and providing the space and context into which others' despair can be hosted, heard and healed. As Brian Draper writes in *Soulfulness* (Hodder and Stoughton, 2016):

We can discover more of our own uniqueness and express this lovingly and purposefully through our actions. I don't want to be stuck in a soulless rut. I want to find the soulful groove, learn to live with energy and creativity, and in the process become a positive, engaging part of the solution at a troubled time.

This soulful, hopeful, centred, groovy way of being provides the energy and inspiration for meaningful action. Living and loving in Christian hope is about becoming part of the 'solution at a troubled time' in such a way that action and activity engage with the heaven-on-earth dimension of life today. Hopeful resistance is about living soulfully, authentically and truthfully.

Some of the most soulful people are also the most wounded people, but they have learnt in some way to continue to live fully, presently and hopefully amid their pain and their despair. Even in these circumstances, a resurrection hope does not look fleetingly towards a future time when pain will be eradicated. Instead, resurrection hope embraces the experiences, names them and talks about them. Emotions flow, and still there is a deeper hope beneath the surface. This hope is not defeated by the personal, communal or global tragedy and despair – but is found in living with the knowledge that in Jesus, the kingdom is here.

Hopeful solidarity is about leaning *into* the pain and suffering of another, be it a neighbour or a stranger. Hope is eternally patient, and to offer that sacred space for a heaven-meeting-earth revelation is the most vital of eschatological callings for individuals and the church.

Eugene Peterson, in *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work* (Eerdmans, 1996), writes:

[Our] work joins the sufferer, shares the experience of God's anger, enters into the pain, the hurt, the sense of absurdity, the descent into the depths. It is not [our] task... to alleviate suffering, to minimise it or to mitigate it, but to share it after the example of our Lord Messiah... By doing that, a person [is assisted] to intensify a capacity for suffering, enables a person to 'lean into the pain.' Writing cheerful graffiti on the rocks in the valley of deep shadows is no substitute for companionship with the person who must walk in the darkness.

Solidarity and spirituality are therefore about discovering hope alongside others, and living faithfully during our own despair as well as the world's hopelessness.

By deeply engaging with the situation of another and enabling both parties to 'lean in', the kingdom of God can begin to do its recalibration and redemptive work. Hopeful solidarity releases us from the expectation that we must have all the answers, that in some way we are the ones who need to fix every situation. 'On earth as it is in heaven' means that any outcome, transition, transformation or change is as a result of God's involvement and not our own.

For the 21st century, this is hugely liberating and captivating. Solidarity is about showing up. What happens next is up to God.

Dinner: the art of creativity

Amid a meaningless, despair-ridden, pain-filled, hopeless existence, being creative and engaging with the arts can appear to be the most frivolous, self-indulgent, bourgeois response. There has been a significant inheritance of the concept of 'high' or fine art, which only an elite few can access. However, creativity is at the heart of the gospel. Creativity sees the status quo and then finds a way to subvert it – for this current experience is not the end of the story. Another world is possible, and humanity has the tools and resources to begin to shape something different, something of life, in the here and now.

Hope and a vision of a renewed future are offered in the words of poets and in the graffiti of protest, in the final brush-flourishes of a canvas and in the rhythm of a crafted piece of music – even in the subway in Washington. Creativity, born ultimately out of the central feature of God's own character (after all, in the beginning was God, and God... created!), offers the means of resuscitation to a dying world. Noticing beauty expands our thinking and our awareness of the present state of being. Creativity is a release valve for the kingdom of God, exploding a new way of being, often changing the atmosphere of a situation, which in turn enables something of the hope within the kingdom of God to crack into the environment.

Hope can be offered in a craftivist project, sending knitted angels to Parliament to ask for a change in the benefits system.

Hope can be offered in painted stones, hidden around a market town as a way of blessing those who find them and pick them up.

Hope can be offered in the entrepreneur of the shoe company that sells designer items to provide clothing for the disadvantaged.

Hope can be offered in the circle of cushions on the floor of a yurt, as a listening place is opened up to help a fractured community find a way forwards.

Hope can be offered in the community garden, built on a derelict sewage works.

Hope can be offered in the café that uses discarded or locally grown products in order to serve a meal to anyone who is hungry.

Hope can be shared in a referral to a food bank, as dinner is served to a hungry family.

Hope can be offered in the women watering the flowers, left in memoriam at the site of a devastating fire.

Hope can be offered, meaning that the love of God in Christ – the divine flow of all things – can be found.

Hopeful resistance is everywhere. There is a choice to be made. Is the world today meant to be experienced as a cold, tortured place of meaninglessness and despair? Or is there, in the words of Paul writing to the Romans, a groaning at the heart of creation that is desperate to offer an alternative?

For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

ROMANS 8:20-25

Creativity is, therefore, part of the invitation to participate in, and co-create with the Spirit, the kingdom of God in the present age. Creativity and recreation are key to living hopefully in an age of fear.

Cultural anthropologist Brené Brown talks of creativity as ‘meaning making’. This can be a very liberating view of Christian hope: a way of helping humanity make meaning in the midst of meaninglessness. Brown’s view is that creativity is such a significant part of being human that it is the one thing which can help to make sense of any given situation. As she writes in *The Gifts of Imperfection* (Hazelden, 2010):

Let me sum up what I’ve learned about creativity:

- 1 ‘I’m not very creative’ doesn’t work. There’s no such thing as creative people and non-creative people. There are only people who use their creativity, and people who don’t. Unused creativity doesn’t just disappear. It lives within us until it’s expressed, neglected to death, or suffocated by resentment and fear.
- 2 The only unique contribution that we will ever make in this world will be born out of creativity.
- 3 If we want to make meaning, we need to make art. Cook, write, draw, doodle, paint, scrapbook, take pictures, collage, knit, rebuild an engine, sculpt, dance, decorate, act, sing – it doesn’t matter. As long as we’re creating, we’re cultivating meaning.

By experiencing the present-day, ‘on earth as it is in heaven’ nature of the kingdom of God, hope expressed in creativity enables us to see beyond ourselves and point to a different reality; to make meaning. Hope is a creative resistance movement against despair and fear, calling humanity into a future not yet imaginable. Just as Jesus’ incarnation meant that he got his hands and feet dirty – so too are we called to embody a faith that is mucky and messy.

Once we have discovered hope in Jesus for ourselves, once we have discovered the love that flows as the source of all things and that calls us forth into the kingdom of God, we are also called to proactive discipleship. Our calling is to be hope-filled and hope-full people who pay attention, who notice the kingdom of God in our midst and who embody practices that change the world. Jesus' model of ministry – a hopeful resistance of dirt, debate, dinner and the promise to live life to the full this side of eternity – offers us a model for our own Christian engagement and hope-filled resistance to a culture of fear. We find hope in Jesus' model of ministry: doing justice, loving in solidarity and living creatively.

Questions for discussion

- How does it feel to walk in someone else's shoes? How does this shape your understanding of Jesus' walking in our shoes?
- How do you feel about Jesus' tactile and visceral engagement with people? How does this inform your own ministerial practices? What might get in the way?
- Which is most important for you – Jesus' life, death or resurrection? Why?
- Where do you need to get your hands and feet dirtier in your local community?
- Who could you invite for dinner? Do it!



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