



16 October 2011
Trinity XVII
Choral Evensong
Isaiah 65 vv. 17–25
Romans 8 vv. 18–39

Habits of the Heart: Virtues for Today

Hope

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I was on holiday in the west of Ireland on the 9th of August when I received a text from my son saying: “Not sure if you have heard anything from London but it’s all kicking off here. Rioting in Chalk Farm and many other places. We are all OK.” And a little later: “All the shops are boarded up round here and swarming with police, some from Manchester.” When I got home the next day I found that the Domino’s Pizza and Evans Cycles just a few minutes’ walk from the vicarage had been ransacked. And all this in quiet, leafy north London. Why had several hundred mostly young people in our pleasant neighbourhood given way to greed and violence?

Of course it turns out that they were mostly the socially disenfranchised, the ones who have given up any idea that they might have a respected place in society, a meaningful job, even a stable relationship with someone. Our church runs a community programme that fosters relationships with young people at risk of social exclusion, and our staff know only too well the frustration and hopelessness that pervades many lives. That doesn’t do anything to excuse criminal behaviour but it does start to put it into context.

What genuine hope is there for our cities and the young people who live in them today? We hear constantly of rising unemployment and debt, cuts in jobs and public services, receding possibilities of getting a foot on the property ladder. My three children are in their twenties, and I know from them what it is like to be starting a profession in London with student debts, sky-high housing prices, and the expectation that one should be willing to work as an intern for nothing at all. If it is hard even for those with the advantage of a good education to be hopeful, we can easily see why the less fortunate are tempted to despair. It is all a far cry from the relatively easy start in adult life that we baby boomers had 30 or 40 years ago.

But that was a blip in human history. Most people throughout history have found life a real challenge. Even my fortunate generation had to deal with the ever-present threat of nuclear conflict between the West and the Soviet Union. As a child I often wondered if the world would still be inhabitable by the time I reached 21. Hope for world peace was in short supply.

Today, if you are a citizen of Palestine, South Sudan, Iran, Syria, Libya, Afghanistan or countless other countries, hope must be hard to lay hold of. And yet it flourishes! It flourishes everywhere. That is the astonishing thing. It is people in the most life-threatening situations who seem to have the strongest sense of how things could be different and better, and they are prepared to struggle and even die for their dreams.

The readings tonight speak of hope in two very different but challenging contexts. The author of our first reading is addressing those who have returned from exile in Babylon to live in the land of Israel. Clearly things haven’t turned out to be paradise on earth. The prophet describes things the way they *ought* to be, not the way they actually are or are likely to be. He paints a picture of a utopian society where justice and peace reign, there is no violence or grief, and people enjoy the fruit of their labours. It is a fantasy picture of perfect happiness.

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But notice what it does not contain: immortality. In the prophet's ideal world, people will live out their normal lifespan and not die prematurely. But the perfect society is one in which people live to be 100, not forever. Death is not abolished.

I grew up in the United States, where a significant minority of people simply don't accept the certainty of death. They are sure that in their lifetime the Lord will come and take them to glory without the unpleasantness of dying. Others, who don't share this religious view, plan to beat death by scientific means, freezing their heads in a cryogenic laboratory so that they can be reunited with a fresh new body in future centuries. That is their definition of hope.

The wisdom of the Bible is rather different. Death comes to us all. The fact that we are mortal should in no way kill off hope: it is in the context of being mortal that we experience hope. What could be more dismal than the prospect of simply dragging on day after day without any end, ever? What would be the point of living?

When Steve Jobs died a couple of weeks ago, his address to the 2005 graduating class of Stanford University was widely reprinted. At the time of his speech, he had just been reprieved from a medical sentence of death. Sadly the cancer he had been successfully treated for later returned, and instead of decades more of life, as he had hoped, he had just six years. But the experience of facing his own mortality had a profound effect on him, and it did not lead to hopelessness, but rather the reverse.

I am sure many of you have heard or read his speech. I'd like to read two short quotes from it:

Remembering that I'll be dead soon is the most important tool I've ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life. Because almost everything — all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure — these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important. Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose. You are already naked. There is no reason not to follow your heart...

And near the end of the speech he says:

No one wants to die. Even people who want to go to heaven don't want to die to get there. And yet death is the destination we all share. No one has ever escaped it. And that is as it should be, because Death is very likely the single best invention of Life. It is Life's change agent.

His words have the ring of truth. It is the reality of death, and its certain arrival at a time no one knows, that gives shape to our lives. It forces us to think about what we hope for and what our heart's desire truly is.

Although death has traditionally been seen as the final enemy, it can also be a friend. Francis of Assisi sang "Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Death, from whom no-one living can escape." Death liberates us from bondage to what is unimportant. It, or should we say She, concentrates our minds on the vision of how the world could be and what we want our lives to be for.

In the letter to the Romans, Paul tells us that God has subjected creation to futility – in other words to the limitation of mortality. But that very limitation produces hope, longing and vision. We hope for what we do not see. We are to live in the Spirit. Notice how the plural is used throughout. Paul's message of hope is not addressed to individuals but to the whole community of believers, a community that was living under the constant risk of persecution and death. Hope is to be found in their common life and faith.

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I've officiated at a couple of hundred funerals, and at almost every one I have read the words at the end of this passage. "I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." They could be seen as words of defiance, proclaimed as the coffin containing a body is brought into church. What victory can be seen at a moment like that? But the words always seem to carry immense power and hope. Yes, death is real, and suffering is an inevitable part of life, but we do not despair. Each of our personal stories is of infinite value.

In this limited, finite, suffering creation, in which one particular day will be the last day of our earthly life, our mortal lives have meaning. We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little lives are rounded by a sleep, to turn from Paul to Prospero. *Because* we will die, we should follow our hearts here and now and do whatever gives meaning to our lives, as Steve Jobs reminded the Stanford students.

I would suggest that it is the very failure to acknowledge that we are mortal that gives rise to hopelessness. Going back to those rioters I began with, they could see no value to their lives except endless consumption. Possessing, by fair means or foul, brand name trainers and flat-screen televisions was the sum total of their dreams. With a mindset like that, the concept of having enough cannot get purchase. Someone else will always have more than I have, and then I must want and get what they have or I will be left behind. Immediately the "we" of Paul's community becomes the "I" of consumerism.

My home may be stuffed full of trainers and TVs, or books and pictures, or Apple gadgets and share certificates, but one day I will be dead. What will my life have meant? If we live in hope, if we have a dream and follow it, the rounding off by a sleep will not be something to fear. We will have lived to some purpose, whether we own many possessions or very few.

Steve Jobs, as far as I know, bravely faced his own mortality with no conviction that there would be anything for him beyond death. Christians need to have the same courage because we face the same reality: one day we will truly die. But our profound trust is that our personal story does not end in the grave.

The Christian hope is not that we simply continue our existence in a bodiless state. We say in the creed that we believe in the resurrection of the body. That means that we will return to the dust from which we came, as dead as anything else in this finite world. But we do so in the *hope* that at the end of time God will make a new heaven and earth and that we will be raised with it to live in God's presence. Heaven is not a boring and endless existence of ghostly harp-playing on a cloud but an eternal now of perfect fulfilment for embodied persons. Our hope is in who God is and what God will graciously do, not in the illusion that we simply go on forever.

We have glimpses of that eternity here and now. They are what give us hope in this present life. At moments when we are overwhelmed by the beauty in creation, the mystery of our existence or the love of someone dear to us, we have a foretaste of what that eternal now will be like.

Isaiah pictures Jerusalem as a joy and her people as a delight. As a passionate Londoner I love the fact that the Bible pictures bliss in urban terms. It has often been observed that the Bible begins in a garden and ends in a city. That's a recognition that human beings are a vital part of the story. What we do and make and dream of will be woven into God's perfect fulfilment.

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We are not passive consumers of creation but co-workers with God, shaping the raw materials of creation with the imagination of our brains and the skill of our hands to bring about new kinds of human flourishing. When we die, perhaps we will leave behind us a book, a song, an invention or a building that will bring delight to future generations. Like the biblical image, we may plant a fig tree and bring up a happy family under it. We may spend our little lifetime trying to help one another make sense of our journey on this earth. Perhaps the dream we pursue will be to give hope to those who are trapped in hopelessness.

Nothing good in this life will ultimately be lost. The new creation will include every bit of love and creativity that forms part of a well-lived life. Christians believe that because our hope is in God, the facts are friendly. So we should waste no energy on despair but live in hope. What we do and become really matters, and the time to start is now.