

22. WHAT IS HOPE?

Fr Luigi Gioia
Theologian In Residence

1. One of the greatest challenges of our existence is learning to manage anxiety and fear.
 - 1.1. They are essential to survival
 - 1.2. They are the physiological response to the perception of dangers (whether real or imaginary)
 - i. Am I doing the right thing in a given situation?
 - ii. Am I making enough money?
 - iii. Am I losing the person I love?
 - iv. Is my health ok?
 - 1.3. Sometimes the risks are real – other times we find ourselves anticipating risks which do not exist or are unlikely to happen.
 - 1.4. From an evolutionary viewpoint, we left the jungle only yesterday and much of our physiological and psychological make-up still is geared to survival in a hostile environment.
 - i. We are programmed to constantly anticipate possible dangers so as to be constantly ready to react to it.
 - ii. But we live in a relatively safer environment now – it is as if we had a Ferrari but we lived in a small village with small alleys. The engine is too powerful for our present need.
 - iii. Learning to manage anxiety and fear is one of the major challenges of our modern lifestyle.
 - iv. Without us being aware of it, this physiological mechanism can condition our perception of ‘what is to come’, our expectations about the future – and have an impact on our self-awareness, and our identity.
2. Most of the time we think about our identity in terms of our past and present experiences: where we come from, the education we have received, what we have achieved. Equally important for our self-awareness are our expectations for the future.¹
 - 2.1. With regards to the past a great role is played by memory
 - 2.2. With regards to our expectations for the future the ability to neutralize the weight of anxiety and fear depend on a variety of factors – among which an important role is played by imagination and self-confidence.
 - 2.3. Imagination and self-confidence play a fundamental role in some of the most highly prized attitudes in our contemporary society: optimism, hopefulness, resilience.

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¹ Barbara Sain, “What is This Hope?: Insights from Christian Theology and Positive Psychology”, *Journal of Moral Theology*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (2020): 98-119. <https://jmt.scholasticahq.com/article/11607-what-is-this-hope-insights-from-christian-theology-and-positive-psychology>

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- 2.4. Now we often approach these attitudes as if they were individual qualities when in fact they are fundamentally relational.
 - 2.5. My sense of wholeness, trust in my abilities, self-confidence depend on the assurance, recognition, affirmation we have received in the decisive stages of formation of my identity – in many ways they depend on the *love* I have received, and the *trust* which has been granted to me.
 - 2.6. The more people (parents, teachers, friends, colleagues) have rooted for me and believed in my possibilities, the more I develop a (relative) autonomy to trust my abilities and expect the best even in challenging moments of my lives.
 - 2.7. We tend to see hopefulness, optimism and resilience as depending on personal willpower, self-confidence, and imagination – when in fact they are relational and depend on trust and love.
- 3. This relational approach to hopefulness can help us to understand *Christian hope*.
 - 4. Christian hope depends on love and faith – and more specifically on
 - 4.1. Openness to the love of God.
 - 4.2. Faith in the resurrection

HOPE AND LOVE

- 5. “The sense of self underpinning hopefulness, optimism, and resilience is often undermined by crises of identity – by the question: ‘Am I the same person as I was?’”²
 - 5.1. “In a culture where the average person is likely not to have a job for life, where increasingly, sadly, the average person is not likely even to have a set of stable relationships for life, is there something that holds together the various coming-and-going experiences that enter into the mind and the psyche?
 - 5.2. Fractured careers and fractured relationships seem to be the order of the day. Is there one story to be told after all about who I am and about who *we* are?”
- 6. [Christian] “hope, when it comes to birth,
 - 6.1. is not just a confidence that there is a future for us,
 - 6.2. it's also a confidence that there's a continuity so that the future is related to the same truth and living reality as the past and the present”.
- 7. “Hope is hope in relation; relation to that which does not go away and abandon, relation to a reality which knows and sees and holds who we are.
 - 7.1. You have an identity because you have a **witness** of who you are. What you don't understand or see, the bits of yourself you can't pull together in a convincing story are all held in a single gaze of love.
 - 7.2. You don't have to work out and finalise who you are and who you have been; you don't have to settle the absolute truth of your history or story; because in the eyes of the presence which does not go away, all that you have been and are

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² For what follows see Rowan Williams, “Faith, hope and charity in tomorrow's world”, <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/584/faith-hope-and-charity-in-tomorrows-world.html>

is still present and real; it is held together in that unifying gaze as if you were to see a pile of apparently disparate, disconnected bits suddenly revealed as being held together by a string, twitched by the divine observer, the divine witness”.

8. “That's very abstract but it's put much more vividly and personally in an extraordinary poem written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great German theologian and martyr.
 - 8.1. It's a poem written when he was in prison for his share in the plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler.
 - 8.2. Bonhoeffer writes, '... they tell me I step out into the prison yard like a squire going to walk around his estate'. (Bonhoeffer was a man of rather aristocratic background and bearing.) And the poem is about the great gulf between what 'they' see – a confident, adult, rational, prayerful, faithful, courageous person – and what he *knows* is going on inside; the weakness and the loss and the inner whimpering and dread.
 - 8.3. 'So which is me?' Bonhoeffer asks. Is it the person that they see or the person that I know when I'm on my own with myself? And his answer is surprising and blunt: 'I haven't got a clue; God has got to settle that. I don't have to decide if I'm really brave or really cowardly, whether I'm really confident or really frightened, or both. Who I am, is in the hands of God.'
 - 8.4. “And that, I would say is hope. [...]
 - i. It goes beyond the assumption that I am only what I see or know.
 - ii. It tells me that I am more than I realize, in the eyes of God, for good or ill.
 - iii. It tells me to hope in 'what is unseen' (a good biblical phrase) and to hope in the one who doesn't need to be told about how human beings work because he knows the human heart:

John 3.19 By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; 20 for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything. 21 Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence (*parrhesia*) before God.”
9. “Hope then, not simply confidence in *the future*, but confidence that past, present and future are held in one relationship so that the confusions about memory – who were we? Who was I? Who am I, and who are we? -- become bearable because of the witness in heaven, a witness who does not abandon”.³
10. Hope depends on **love**:
 - 10.1. “The fear which transcends all fears is the fear of losing love altogether. [...] If the fear that transcends all fears is in the last resort fear of losing love, then the hope which transcends all hopes is the assurance of being showered with the gift of a great love”
 - 10.2. This concerns one of the greatest expressions of the whole history of religions, “God is love”

1 John 4. 6 We have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him”.

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³ Rowan Williams, *ibid*.

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- 10.3. [...] hope has for its ultimate goal the fulfillment of love.
- 10.4. If therefore hope and love on the one hand, and God and love on the other, are inseparable, then it ought to be clear that God and hope go together; and that finally the one who is without hope is truly one who “lives without God in the world”⁴.

11. “And that suggests a Church marked by profound **patience**:

- 11.1. patience with actual human beings in their confusions and uncertainties;
- 11.2. patience in an environment when so much seems to be unclear and in danger of getting lost;
- 11.3. patience in the sense that we realize it takes time for each one of us to grow up into Christ, and if it takes time for each one of us then it takes time for the Body, the community to grow overall.
- 11.4. Hope and patience belong together. I would say that only a Church which is learning patience can proclaim hope effectively”⁵.

HOPE AND FAITH

12. With regards to **faith**, Christian hope is more than hopefulness and optimism because its foundation is not in whether we can trust our abilities/possibilities/odds/self – but in whether we can trust *God*.

- 12.1. And not God in general, but the God who rose Christ from the dead
- 12.2. Resurrection and hope are inseparable:
 - 1 Cor 15.¹⁴ If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. [...] ¹⁹ If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.
- 12.3. Trust in the Resurrection means trust in a love which is stronger than death – which is the epitome of all of our human fears and anxieties:

Song of Solomon 8

⁶ Set me as a seal upon your heart,
as a seal upon your arm,
for love is strong as death,
jealousy is fierce as the grave.
Its flashes are flashes of fire,
the very flame of the Lord.
⁷ Many waters cannot quench love,
neither can floods drown it.
If a man offered for love
all the wealth of his house,
he would be utterly despised.

- 12.4. However great human hopefulness, optimism, and resilience can be they face an unsurmountable wall: death – which is not just our physical end, but also our ultimate fear of failure, irrelevance, meaninglessness.

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⁴ Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, “On Hope”, *Communio* 35 (Summer 2008), <https://www.communio-icr.com/files/ratzinger35-2.pdf>

⁵ Rowan Williams, *ibid*.

- 12.5.** This explains why Paul presents Christian hope as that which makes the decisive difference:

Ephesians 2. **11**Therefore remember that at one time [...] you were separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. **13**But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. [...] **18**For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. **19**So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, **20**built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, **21**in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. **22**In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

1 Thessalonians 4. **13**But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no **hope.** **14**For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. **15**For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. **16**For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. **17**Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. **18**Therefore encourage one another with these words.

- 13.** “In the New Testament as with the apostolic fathers, the concepts of hope and faith are, to a certain extent, interchangeable.”⁶

- 13.1.** Thus 1 Peter speaks of rendering an account of our hope, where it is a question of becoming the interpreter of faith to the pagans.

1 Peter 3:15 In your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.

- 13.2.** The epistle to the Hebrews calls the confession of the Christian faith a “confession of hope” (10:23).

Hebrews 10:23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.

- 13.3.** The epistle to Titus defines faith that has been received as a “blessed hope” (2:13).

Titus 2 **11**For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, **12**training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, **13**waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, **14**who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and

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⁶ Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, “On Hope”, *Communio* 35 (Summer 2008), <https://www.communio-icr.com/files/ratzinger35-2.pdf>

to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.

- 13.4. The epistle to the Ephesians poses as a premise of the fundamental affirmation “one Lord, one Faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all,” that there is “only one hope to which you are called” (4:4–6).

Ephesians 4. ⁴There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. ⁷But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift.

14. Hope could accordingly be described as an anticipation of what is to come (thanks to faith).

14.1. In it, the “not yet” is in a certain way already here [...].

14.2. what is “not yet” is already realized in our life. Only a certain kind of present can create the absolute confidence which is hope.

14.3. Such is the definition of faith given in the epistle to the Hebrews:

Hebrews 11:1 Faith is the substance (“hypostasis”) of what is hoped for, the certitude of what one does not see.

PRAYER AND HOPE

15. The Our Father gives us the model of all prayer, it provides the rule that governs the link between prayer and hope.

15.1. First the Our Father by its very content has something to do with hope.

15.2. In the second place, it responds to the daily anxieties of people and encourages them to transform these through prayer into hopes.

- i. It is a matter of each day’s subsistence;
- ii. it is a matter of the fear of evil which menaces us in multiple ways;
- iii. it is a matter of peace with our neighbor, of making peace with God and protecting ourselves from the real evil, the fall into lack of faith, which is also hopelessness.
- iv. Thus the question of hope goes back to hope itself, to our longing for paradise, for the Kingdom of God with which our prayer begins.
- v. But the Our Father is more than a catalogue of subjects of hope; it is hope in action.
- vi. To pray the Our Father is to deliver ourselves to the dynamism of what is asked for, to that of hope itself. One who prays is one who has hope, for such a person is not yet in the position of one who has everything.”⁷