

Hope in an age of despair

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Introduction.

For centuries we have lived in great hopefulness. In the area of science, politics, economics there was a large degree of optimism. But over the past few years this optimism has turned into despair. There are all kinds of reasons for this. But one thing is clear: in this age of despair we Christians are called upon 'to give an account of the hope that is in us' (1P).

1. Age of despair.

The 17th century gave birth to the Age of Reason. The Enlightenment. It gave birth to the dream of unlimited human progress. Science would solve all human problems. The potential of human reason seemed unlimited.

But gradually this dream became unstuck and turned into a nightmare.

The Russian Revolution, the French Revolution, Nazism, Colonialism are a few examples of the devastating consequences of such reckless trust in reason.

Today few believe that science and technology alone can solve all our problems.

A few examples of shifts from optimism to disillusionment and despair in our time.

South Africa

The struggle against apartheid was won.

There was a relatively peaceful transition.

Mandela proved a wise and charismatic leader.

But today, some fifteen years later, there is a lot of disillusionment, despair.

People ask: Is this what we fought for?

Socialism, Communism.

For many decades millions of people believed that these ideologies and social constructs would bring greater equality and progress.

Since 1989 this hope has vanished.

These ideologies have failed.

Free Market Capitalism.

In some ways 1989 was seen as the victory of capitalism over communism.

Free market capitalism took an even greater flight than before.

There was an unlimited faith in the 'invisible hand' of the market.

Unlimited development was thought to be possible.

But the bubble has burst.

The Market has failed us.

Now the poor will get poorer faster even than before!

The Church.

Vatican II ushered in a time of great hope and optimism for the Church.

The Church would open its windows and move away from its authoritarian reflexes.

But after the initial hopeful changes almost all the gains have slowly been undermined.

Add to this the sex scandals.

The lack of vocations in many countries.

All this is a formula for demoralisation for many (not all).

Most of the signs we see around us point to greater gloom and doom.

Take the issue of global warming, climate change.
The lack of political will to do something effective about it has brought some to doubt if human life will survive on this planet.

2. Christian Hope

All these signs of failure and reasons for despair are not a disaster. They are a magnificent new opportunity for the development of genuine Christian hope.
For a Christian there is always hope. St Paul enjoins to remain hopeful even when all the signs are against such an attitude.

*We put all our hope and trust in God.
Ultimately God is the only basis for our hope.*

This raises huge theological questions in our time, of course.
For many people God is dead, a meaningless cipher.
Saying you trust in God is no more than a pious cop-out.

So what do we mean when we say we put all our hope in God?

Ps 146: We do not put our trust in princes.

Political, industrial, ecclesial, Obama, human leaders of any kind. None of them is powerful enough, all knowing enough, to save the world.

No human institutions – government, even the Church etc. – can save the world.

No human ideology – socialism, free market economy, even democracy – can save the world.

We ourselves cannot save the world.

Of course, there has to be a measure of trust in human beings – a doctor, a pilot etc – for the world to function, but in the final analysis I cannot put all my trust in these, in any of the above, not even in myself.

God alone is the basis of our hope.

What are we hoping for?

Christian hope is centred on the coming of the Kingdom and on doing God's will (Our Father).

God's will is what is best for all of us, the common good.

What is best for everyone is also best for me – however much some might argue against this. Even if I find this difficult.

In the past what people were hoping for was not the common good but tainted with selfishness and self interest. Economic growth, yes, but very lopsided, profiting a few and marginalizing many.

How do we see God?

What we rely upon as Christians is God's work in the universe and God is at work all the time, sustaining and loving. God is involved in everything, in every area of life. God is at work in you and me. We don't always see, understand what God does. But God's work cannot fail.

Christian hope means relying upon the goodness of the great unfolding of the universe.

All depends on God, God's great work.

The problem is that our faith is often weak.

It is not so easy to believe in our age.

But some things have become clearer over time.

Our – always limited- understanding of God does develop.

Belief in God has developed over the centuries.

You can see a clear progression in the Bible itself.

Take the example of the problem of suffering:

In the past many thought suffering was caused by God (sin!)

Then the conviction gained ground that God did not cause but allowed suffering.

Now theologians have come to the insight that God suffers with us.

We now have come to understand that God is to be found first and foremost with/in the victims of injustice. He is with the people who are sinned against, with the marginalized and the forgotten.

Some ask:

What is the use of a powerless, suffering God?

God is all powerful by the power, not of force or coercion, but of compassion and love.

God's way of acting is compassion and love.

These are far more powerful than any power on earth.

So we Christians need to continue in hope even when there are no signs of hope.

And we need to face the despair head-on.

When we are in that darkness our eyes will gradually adjust and something of the shape of God's action in the world will begin to emerge. We will begin to see the 'finger of God'.

Examples.

- A leading peace activist has shown that the war in Iraq has led to an exponential increase in the number of peace activists.
- Natural disasters – tsunami etc – generate huge waves of compassion.
- The economic collapse and recession has helped many to begin to realise that the greed of the super rich is at the root of this.
- The sex abuse scandals have brought a powerful awareness of how the Church has failed and generated a wave of concern for the victims.
- The mistaken policies of the Bush government have made possible the election of Barack Obama and a strong call for change.
- The Israeli invasion in Gaza prompts an unprecedented meeting of Jews and Muslims in South Africa.

Thus 'God writes straight on crooked lines (Augustine)

Ultimately our hope is based on the Crucifixion, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Jesus' crucifixion and death were the cause of despair for the disciples.

Emmaus story. 'We had hoped....'

On the cross Jesus himself cries: 'My God, my God why have you forsaken me'.

But gradually in that darkness the disciples begin to see the finger of God in what has happened.

They come to see that Jesus is active in a whole new and surprising way.

The Risen Lord is with them.

And Jesus' Spirit is now in them.

The cross is not a total failure, but paradoxically it is the scene of God's triumph. This is so much so, that the crucifixion is far more powerful than anything else Jesus has done during his life. It is the almighty power of suffering love.

Conclusion

The Resurrection is the great *symbol* of our hope. But God is the *basis* of our hope.

So for us Christians what matters in the long run is not only that we put our hope and trust in God, but also that we *act hopefully* even in situations that appear to be absolutely hopeless. That's what it means to have Christian hope.

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