



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 23rd July 2023

Readings: *Wisdom 12. 13, 16-19; Psalm 86.11-17; Romans 8.12-25; Matthew 13:24-30,36-43*

Trinity VII

The New Testament epistles aim at giving a mixture of good theology and good practice. Some focus on quite heavy doctrine about Jesus, followed by briefer sections applying that to life. In others, whilst there *is* theology, they major on offering wisdom about how to live the Christian life, how to be the Church, and what eldership and ministry are about. Witness the letters to Timothy and to Titus, often attributed to St Paul. As two young apostles labour amongst the embryonic churches in Ephesus and on Crete, a more adroit companion sends them what have come to be known as the Pastoral Epistles. They train, exhort, and encourage.

How would it be if we were blessed with some pastoral epistles to today's church to train, exhort, and encourage *us*? Discussing the letter to Titus, this week's Bible Study Group in Fulbourn was asked what would they find helpful to read in such a contemporary 'pastoral epistle'. I was eager that we should not merely look back nostalgically, but that we would seek ideas that would equip us for moving toward God's tomorrow. Ideas for a pastoral epistle that were mentioned included: **forgiveness** - which of us doesn't know our need of that?; **listening** - Rowan Williams recognises the centrality of listening in his poem about the Rublev icon of the Trinity: '... we shall sit and speak around one table, share one food, one earth';¹ another mentioned **inclusivity** as something a pastoral epistle might offer and urge, and if our experience is of being left out in the cold by the church, how we would identify with that; and then there was **hope** – hope seems to be at a premium today, and an epistle would scarcely merit the epithet 'pastoral' if it did not nourish it

Over the past fortnight, the readings from Paul's letter to the Romans have given great weight to the reality of sin, and the even greater reality of God's desire to heal us from its power and its impact. Now we reach the passage where the Apostle can emphasise how we need and can find hope. He suggests we need hope because, in his graphic phrase, we are 'groaning', as if in labour. As the childbirth analogy implies, groaning is a word that conveys serious inner stress about what is happening or might happen; a deep-seated expression that things hurt, things disturb, something's happening to us, which we can't control. Maybe we'd be groaning if we were in today's Israel/Palestine; or in one of the swathes of Pacific islands gradually being engulfed by rising seas, or experiencing gender dysphoria; or in one of the sink estates on the edge of a post-industrial British city, or caught up in giving birth, or feeling the gentle beckoning of death - groaning in the very core of our being.

From Romans 8, we heard a unique section of Paul's writing; unique because nowhere other than in the passage Ian read does Paul speak not just of *people* groaning, but of *all creation* feeling at risk. It's as if all creation is robbed of confidence, about its flourishing. After all, creation might well groan, given that its freedom and thriving are linked to our own. We can resist Ultra Low Emission Zones all we like, and maybe we should, so long as we do so aware of how universal the environment's groaning is, and come up with another solution.

Clearly, hope is at a premium. We long and sigh for it, as our Bible Study revealed.

And such hope is fundamental to the Bible's teaching. The Psalms – emerging from so rich a variety of human experiences – abound in hope. The one we read together does, without

¹ Williams, Rowan 2002 *Rublev* in *The Poems of Rowan Williams* Oxford: The Perpetua Press page 35

using the word, but as we began the service with Psalm 42, it found us longing for God like a deer does for water, and putting our hope in the quenching of God's steadfast love.² Job, beset with suffering over a long period, nonetheless epitomises hope because of what Calvin sees as Job's ultimate certainty that God is good, reasonable, and just.³ And hope is amongst Paul's basics of Christian discipleship, alongside faith and love.⁴ In Romans, he builds his entire argument towards its conclusion with a hope-shaped summary of what the Gospel offers: 'May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.'⁵

Now, we rarely use the word 'hope' without a preposition. A preposition being what the Cambridge Dictionary defines as '*a word that connects a noun, or a pronoun to another word, like a verb, ... or an adjective,*'⁶ which preposition might we use with hope?

In my former job, an episcopal colleague used to describe himself as the Bishop of Three Prepositions. He was at one and the same time the multi-tasking Bishop *of* Dover, *for* the Falkland Islands, and *to* Her Majesty's Forces.

And so it is with hope. For example, we hope *for* something, we hope *that* something, we have hope *of* something, and we place our hope *in* something.

Let's be clear: these prepositions do not depict a *hope* that is somehow different for today. It is the hope that God has forever offered in Jesus Christ. But, as Christian hope always has been, it is predicated upon a radical critique of what *is*, in order to be launched into what *shall be*. As Walter Brueggemann has it: 'Weep for the "now" that is dying. If one weeps its death, one will be freed for the newness that God is giving.'⁷ So it is that hope, inspired by the past, invites us to rediscover, to reimagine God's future, and faithfully to voice and enact it in today's world.

Back to those four prepositions.

First, through Jesus Christ, we are invited to hope **for salvation**, which is knowing God, being set free and put right with God, and living for God, just as in Christ, God lives with us and for us.

Secondly, through Jesus Christ, we are invited to hope **that God's disappointment in us is satisfied by God's mercy and grace towards us**. Remember the Parable of Wheat and Weeds, where we might hear Jesus saying there will be wheat people who point us to abundant life and weedy ones who are stumbling blocks to our faith and discipleship. But then we are told it is not for us to judge the wheat from the weeds; the angels will do that on behalf of God. And that is the God who even rescued and redeemed Simon Peter, the *ultimate* stumbling block,⁸ making *that* block into the rock upon which the Church is built, to this day. God invites us to trust in grace amidst our groaning. As today's opening words from Wisdom have

² Psalm 42.1 and 6a

³ Calvin, John tr Leroy Nixon 1952 *Sermons from Job* Grand Rapids: Michigan page 28
Available at <https://calvin.edu/centers-institutes/meeter-center/files/Calvin%20Sermon%20on%20Job.pdf>;
accessed 22nd July 2023

⁴ I Corinthians 13.13

⁵ Romans 15.13

⁶ Available at <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/preposition> Accessed 21st July 2023

⁷ Brueggemann, Walter 1986 *Hopeful Imagination: prophetic voices in exile* Philadelphia: Fortress Press, page 44

⁸ Matthew 16.23

it: ‘you have filled your children with good hope, because you give repentance for sins; judging with mildness.’⁹

Thirdly, through Jesus Christ, we are invited to have hope **of eternal life**, when whatever is beyond the grave, we have the promise that we will be held within the arms of the one who groaned on the cross, and even now enfolds the whole of that groaning creation.

And finally, through Jesus Christ, we are invited to hope **in the faithfulness of God**, of whom we sang, ‘*all I have needed thy hand hath provided, great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me. Blessings all mine with ten thousand beside.*’

Such are just some of the prepositions attached to hope – hope which forever migrates¹⁰ us from the place of groaning, towards that reign of God, where judgement is shaped by grace, where death is answered with life, and where tomorrow is the theatre of God’s ongoing drama of goodness and truth. As Thomas W. Currie III puts it: ‘Hope is acting as if heaven were our country...’.¹¹

And so to conclude, I note that hymn lyricists frequently write of hope. We’ve already sung of Henry Alford’s hope that, wheat and weeds though we be, all will be ‘safely gathered in, free from sorrow, free from sin’. And in a moment, we will echo Robert Graves’ hope that day by day ‘safe through change and chance God guides me’. But I close with words from a peerless example of the United Reformed Church’s fine treasury of hymn writers. Alan Gaunt died a few days ago, aged 87. His legacy includes many texts that will enrich our worship for long years to come. Among his most frequently used is the hymn, *Come, living God, when least expected*. Here are its final lines – for Alan, for you and me, for all creation:

*Then, through our gloom, your Son will meet us as vivid truth and living Lord,
exploding doubt and disillusion to scatter hope and joy abroad.
And we will share his radiant brightness, and, blazing through the dread of night,
illuminate by love and reason, for those in darkness, faith’s delight.*¹²

N. P. Uden 23rd July 2023

⁹ Wisdom 12.19b, 18a

¹⁰ Currie, Thomas W. 2015 *Bread for the Journey: notes to those preparing for ministry* Eugene, Oregon: Resource Publications page 203

¹¹ *ibid*, page 203

¹² Gaunt, Alan 1936-2023 from the hymn *Come, living God, when least expected* RS 354.5-6