

Behind the Waterfall – Hope and Vision

Jeremiah 32 / Hebrews 12:1-3

Well, we're nearly at the end of our series of sermons diving into the Old Testament, and today's theme is like a steel thread running the religious psyche of Jews and Christians alike. It's the theme of hope: hope and vision. Hope is one of the necessities for human life, yet like exercise, good food, and good relationships, we often neglect it. We don't attend to it; we fail to develop it – then we find it weak when we most need it. Some people substitute the strong nourishment of hope with the easier fast food of optimism. But hope isn't the same as optimism. It doesn't really matter to optimism whether that thing comes to pass: you just say, "oh well..." But hope – true hope – is founded on reality, forged in reality, framed in reality, and focused through reality. True hope isn't about mood but relationship; it's not about feeling but about people.

Hope Throughout the Bible

In the Bible, the prime reality for hope is the reality and person of God – his character and his connection with the world. We see hope in the book of Genesis where God promises Abraham that even in he and his wife's old age, he will have descendants as numerous as the grains of sand of the sea shore. We see hope in Exodus where God says, **"I have heard the cries of my people."** (Exodus 3:7) and he promises to get involved and liberate them.

We find hope in the book of Numbers, where Moses pleads with God not to give up on them: "But think of your reputation" he says. "If you leave us here everyone will know that you weren't able to finish what you started." (Numbers 14:13-16) We find hope in Deuteronomy and the history books, based on God's solemn promises to David and his throne.

But among the greatest exponents of hope in the Old Testament were the prophets of Exile: Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Isaiah chapters 40-66. There were people who held onto hope in the darkest days - even when the nation was defeated, decimated, destroyed, and led away in their thousands to captivity in a far off land. They realised that because God himself had allowed their defeat, so he would also bring them back.

Let me just summarise the history for you.

History of Israel to the Exile

The Jewish people grew from twelve tribes. They were united under David, but this united monarchy only lasted for two reigns. After Solomon's reign the kingdom fractured and became weak, and at the same time the super powers of Assyria and later Babylon rose up. In 723 BC at least 28,000 Jews – nine of the twelve tribes - were conquered and forced to march 400 miles into exile. Two decades on the Assyrians came again, this time against Jerusalem. Amazingly, they withdrew, Herodotus, the Greek historian, saying it was because mice gnawed through all the strings of their archers bows. Whatever the reason, the Jerusalem establishment saw it as a sign that God's hand would always protect them. How wrong they were. In 612 BC the Assyrians themselves were conquered by Babylon. In 597 the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar crashed through taking thousands more captive and in 587BC they systematically destroyed Jerusalem mercilessly burning the city, and leading off every educated person who wasn't killed.

Jeremiah was a prophet at this time and he hated it. Having predicted the fall of Jerusalem he was branded a traitor as it happened. The bulk of his prophecies signal doom for the city, yet in a strange way this qualifies him even more to be a prophet of hope. One thing you could be sure of with Jerry was he would never say things just to make you feel good. If Jeremiah had a word of hope it wasn't just to cheer people up – it was because he really believed that was what God said.

Is now a good time to buy property?

Well, Jeremiah bought a field. If you asked whether now was a good time to buy property in the UK, most people would say, “No - at least wait until next year if you can. We live in uncertain times, but imagine if we were about to be invaded, or about to be attacked with nuclear weapons. In those circumstances you would certainly not buy property. Jeremiah bought a field while the Babylonian army were camped outside the city – and he bought it specifically as a symbol of hope. He knew that he himself would probably never enjoy that field, never plough it, never reap it, never feed from it. But Jeremiah said, **“This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: take these documents, both the the sealed and the unsealed copies of the deed of purchase, and put them in a clay jar so they will last a long time. For this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: houses, fields and vineyards will again be bought in this land.”** (Jer. 32:13-15)

I want to use the rest of this sermon to think about the way Jeremiah and others like him understood hope and sought to build it in others. We all need hope. We need it when things are going well, but even more when things are piling up against us. But the first thing I want to say about hope is that it needs shaping.

Hope Needs Shaping

Hope needs shaping. 31 years ago when my mum was dying of cancer, none of us were optimistic about her chances of survival. Things were different in those days – unlike now, most people *didn't* survive cancer. 20 years ago when my sister was dying of cancer, the situation was again similar. What kind of hope can a person have when faced with such things? It's not optimism in the situation, but it can be hope in God, who somehow is bigger than the situation. Shaping hope means asking questions like “where is my hope placed?” Do I hope that I won't lose my job in the gathering recession – you may well do that and reasonably so - but at a more primary is my hope in God who said “I will never leave you nor forsake you”?

God never promised we'd be in constant employment; he never promised our loved ones would survive every physical, mental, or even spiritual attack. But he did promise “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” When Jerusalem was destroyed people assumed God had left them. Gradually they realised, through the powerful hope Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Isaiah, that he'd been with them all along, he was still with them in exile, and that he *would* bring them back.

Allowing my hope to be shaped means first of all asking the question “*who* is my hope with?” before I asked, “*what* is my hope for?” If my hope is *in* the doctors, then I'm probably hoping *for* a cure. That may be good, but it's limited and my hope might be disappointed. If my hope is *in* politicians I may be hoping *for* peace or victory. My hope may or may not be disappointed. If my hope is in God, what am I hoping for then? It might still be a cure; it might still be peace; but hope in God also goes beyond that to a wider, deeper, taller, bigger place. Beyond hoping for immediate solution and relief from crisis, I hope for courage and love, for a sense of God's presence, and for on-going belief.

Hope needs shaping, and as it becomes shaped this God-centred hope gives space to breathe, pray, and draw inspiration. This kind of hope allows conversation.

Hope Allows Conversation

I remember praying for my mum to be healed. “Please heal her, please heal her,” I used to pray over and over again. When our hope is focused simply on the one thing we want rather than on the person we're trusting in, there's no space for conversation. As my hope became shaped I found more space to really talk with God and listen. When she died, I knew she was at peace not only because it was the end, but from an assurance of God's Spirit.

Here in Jeremiah 32 we have a conversation. Having bought the field, Jeremiah says to God, “Look the Babylonians have surrounded us. The siege ramps have gone up, and you told me to buy a field!” (vv.17-25) He's asking God to explain himself - and God replies. Jeremiah won't get

a return on his field, but he understands something of why he had to buy it – as a prophetic symbol that the people would return.

Vaclav Havel is a playwright and politician who led Czechoslovakia from communism to multi-party democracy. He said, *“Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense regardless of how it turns out.”* We often find it hard to make sense of this world, but when our hope's in God we know that somewhere, somehow, things do make sense within his deep purposes.

Hope offers space, therefore. And hope also gives courage.

Hope Gives Courage

When your city's being attacked, or your job is on the line, or your life is under threat, or you're living with daily abuse you need hope for the future but you also need courage for the present; you need hope in the bigger future perspective but you need courage for living in the present constriction. But courage is nourished by hope, and that true hope in God – is far more beneficial to those in need than mere optimism. Optimism may cheer someone up, but we all know it's just based on what we feel like. Hope in God brings courage.

Faith-Hope-Love Cycle

St Paul was a man of tremendous courage. He wrote, **“So these three remain, faith, hope and love.”** (1 Cor.13). I think we can describe these three in a kind of cycle: First there's Faith – and faith needs to be exercised in order to give birth to Hope. Jeremiah didn't find life easy at all. Time after time he was thrown back onto God and had to *exercise* faith - *“I do believe. Your faithfulness in the past gives me faith in the present.”* When we make the decision to *exercise* faith in God, we find Hope conceived within us and we give birth to it. Giving birth of any kind is hard work, and with true hope the effort of faith needs to be made.

Hope, however, when it's born, is a fantastic gift – because hope feeds love. Think of people who've given you courage through hardship – they're sharing the gift of hope. Napoleon said, *“Courage is like love; it must have hope for nourishment.”* Why love, why live if there's no future? Hope feeds love. It enables us to stand by one another, support one another, walk with one another – for hundreds of miles.

And love, when shared, enables faith. That's how most people actually come to faith in my experience: through the love of people around them. It's also how they lose faith – when they feel

unloved. Love is the tangible expression of hope and when shared or imparted it enables the loved one to look up. Can you think of a time when you've been loved – even as a child, and it enabled you to look up. When you look up, you can have faith. The psalmist said, “I lift my eyes up to the hills. Where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord.” (Psalm 121).

Where are you going to climb on board? How are you going to bring hope to those around you? Perhaps the first thing is to exercise faith – or help them to exercise faith. But then the best way to do enable that is to share love, because love provides the bed in which faith can grow. Faith, hope and love: they work together.

And in the centre of these three is joy. Joy is what happens when the jigsaw fits together. Joy is all about meeting what our hearts were longing for, finding the home we thought we'd lost years ago, reconnecting. That's why you feel joy when you meet an old friend; or give birth to a child; or receive the Holy Spirit whom God made you for; or find reconciliation through Jesus Christ. That's why, in the midst of tremendous suffering, poor communities throughout the world still express their faith, hope and love in joyous dance. Joy is the goal of hope, anticipated by love and taken hold of by faith. And that's why, even in the midst of desolation, our souls, touched by God's love through the Holy Spirit, can rise up in joy as we anticipate the fulness of reconciliation through faith.

Is that what you need right now? Then come to Jesus Christ. Open your heart afresh to God's love through the Holy Spirit. Pray with me now. Pray with someone at the end of the service.