

In Hope We Were Saved

Romans 8:14-25 - Dr Mary Tanner

(Sunday 4th October 1998, St James Anglican Church, Sydney, Australia)

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, I take as my text a verse from the end of that wonderful but demanding reading we heard from St Paul's letter to the Romans: 'In hope we were saved.'

You, like me, can, I expect, point to moments of disclosure in your own life, transforming experiences which have changed the direction of your lives forever. In 1974 I found myself quite unexpectedly in Accra, in Ghana, at a meeting of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches. It was the first time that Faith and Order had met in what we called then a 'Third World' country. It was my first encounter with the Faith and Order Commission and with the World Council of Churches and my first visit to Africa. My university Professor, the distinguished Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge, Geoffrey Lampe, a large man in stature, in vision and in understanding had amazingly asked me to attend the meeting as his proxy. I didn't realize it at the time but looking back I can see that was a mark of his total commitment to opening up the circle of interpretation to women and to young people, his commitment to creating a more inclusive ecumenical community. So I arrived, naive and young, weighted down with my Hebrew and Greek Bible, large dictionaries and an even larger concordance. What else did elderly, male theologians do than sit around a table discussing the latest discoveries of biblical criticism?

Instead, I found myself in one of a number of groups charged with the task of giving an account of our hope. When asked directly, 'What is your hope?' I remember the feeling of panic, I simply didn't know what to say, how to answer. I wonder how you would answer that same question. Try putting it to yourself at the end of today. What is my hope?... All I could do was to grasp at conventional biblical language and pictures about hope - the lamb lying down with the kid, the weapons of war turned into ploughshares, the land flowing with milk and honey. All I could do was to repeat conventional biblical language and pictures about hope for the future - the Old Testament concept of shalom, the beautiful visions of Isaiah, or the flights of apocalyptic imagination, or in the very vaguest of ways talk of hope for life beyond death. My grasping desperately at biblical images was of course a way of evading the existential question put to me - What is your hope? I began to wonder whether I could talk of hope at all. Nor was I alone. The confusion some of us shared had something to do with the fear of facing up to the fact that hope played so little, practically no part, in our own lives. Our responses sounded theologically wise and erudite, with their heap of biblical clues - but it was difficult for some of us to say we actually lived in and by hope, or that we connected with hope at all. There seemed so little immediate personal dimension to hope.

And this stood in such stark contrast to others in the circle whose faces simply shone when they were asked to talk of their hope. They talked with such burning passion and conviction. It was those who lived in positions of oppression and violence and hopelessness. Desmond Tutu in the midst of the situation of apartheid in its seemingly most hopeless days, laughing with hope, bubbling over with hope. Gordon Gray in the midst of the mindless bombings in Northern Ireland, the violence that seemed unending which he described in a poem;

Father, I am a man of my time and situation
Around me, the signs and symbols of man's fear hatred, alienation
a bomb exploding in a crowded market square
demagogic faces on TV twisted in mocking confrontation the forces of opposition too great.

The women who were overwhelmed by the violence done to women in the world and in the Church, women always at the bottom of the pile, whose vocations could not be named or tested by the Church. We've heard with dreadful clarity the same stories of violence done to women in the Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women.

It was those in the most hopeless of situations who spoke not faltering, hesitant words but confident words of hope, hope against hope. Their testimonies of hope were not the repetition of the Isaianic idyllic time, not the New Jerusalem of Ezekiel, not the City that comes down out of heaven of the Book of Revelation.

Their picture of hope was the certain knowledge of Jesus Christ crucified and risen from the dead, a radical hope, the sure knowledge that in the midst of the obscenity of apartheid, in the midst of the inhuman bombings in Northern Ireland, in the midst of the violence done to women, there was and is the power of life over death. It was this that made them as sure as Mother Julian of Norwich that 'all things shall be well, all manner of things shall be well.' Asked to give account of the hope that was in them what came first was not the assurance that apartheid would be overcome, not the assurance that the bombings in Northern Ireland would cease, not the confidence that the violence done to women would end. What came first in their account of hope was a certainty that at the heart of their lives, at the heart of all life, is the simple and glorious truth of Jesus Christ crucified and risen from the dead, and the belief that through that mysterious event, God's Spirit had been poured into their lives and into the lives of all who turn to God, and that through those events, the coming of God among us and God's identifying with us and dying for us, their life was given meaning and they could dare to hope against hope.

Desmond and Gordon and Connie and the others knew what St Paul knew in that lesson we heard read that in the middle of the most death-dealing situations, unimaginable to most of us there was life — that life was not on the other side of the awfulness, on the other side of suffering - but there in the very midst of the awfulness and bloodiness of it all. In the middle of it they knew and could count on a life-giving relationship with God, through the cross of Christ, and in the power of the Holy Spirit. They could trust in a God who had been there before, a God who was very close and was holding them like a parent cradles a child. The women in particular knew exactly what Paul knew. It is not some remote, stern Victorian Father that held them, but the close, familiar and tender parent we dare to call Abba, Daddy.

What we discovered together as a community of reflection charged to give an account of our hope was the inextricable relation between hope and faith. Hope is the other side of the coin of faith. Hope is faith in action, hope is faith springing into life, and springing into life in the middle of hopelessness and despair - in the middle of it and not on the other side of it. We discovered what St Paul tells us in Romans, 'in hope we were, and are, saved' - 'It is this that gives assurance of what Paul tells us in Romans;

the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed.

and the glory to be revealed is the liberation of all things - all humanity and the whole of the created universe, from violence, and pain and sorrow. Christian hope is not only for humanity, but for the whole of the created universe. We are only slowly seeing the implications of this for our responsibility to care for creation.

It is, isn't it, the same faith and hope at the heart of all things, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the very truth of a God who redeems and sanctifies, that each of us has to discover for ourselves, We have to discover it over and over again in our personal lives when we lose a friend, a parent, a child, someone we love. In the middle of the awful aching and apparent hopelessness of their going we discover a little of the truth that life has, and will, triumph over death, our little crucifixions blossom in a spring of hope. We learn that we can, in the power of

the Spirit, hope against hope, because the ground of our hope is in the God who died and rose again that we might have life in all its fullness.

And in our community of reflection those days in Accra we discovered something else as we struggled to give an account of hope, the hope that was in us. We discovered that our faith in the central message of the Gospel, Jesus Christ crucified and risen was what united us. Whether we were Roman Catholics, or Orthodox, or Protestants, or Disciples of Christ, or Lutherans paled into insignificance compared to the unity that was already ours in our shared faith . We found a profound unity at the very heart of the Gospel message. This put our disagreements over the ordained ministry, over primacy, over the ordination of women to the priesthood, over eucharistic theology in a totally other perspective, in the perspective of those whose lives and whose hope depend upon the one and the same faith. We could look at one another as brothers and sisters who together call Abba . Our ecclesial divisions were both relativised and seen for what they are - an absurdity and a scandal, a denial of the faith we held in common. We could see starkly that our refusal to live out our common faith in the midst of the brokenness of the world's Irelands and South Africas, today's Sudans and Bosnias, damages the credibility of our faith and obscures our hope.

And that leads me to one final thought. As we learnt to exchange our accounts of hope we discovered that hope breeds hope - and hope increases faith. Celebrating signs of hope together is a way of confirming in us our common faith. Gordon Gray again, in the midst of the blasts of Northern Ireland. I thought of his poem written twenty-five years ago in Accra, when I saw him on television speaking the same message of hope in the latest tragic bombing only weeks ago in Omagh:

I do see signs of hope.

I see them immediately around me

my children, full of life and zest, of hopes and dreams

my wife, incarnating your love as teacher, setting free

from ignorance men imprisoned and detained without trial, no matter who they are

the member of my church who said 'I've thought of what you said and changed my mind.'

I see a wider sign

a new determination among some to replace sectarianism with socialism

Christians transcending the past by finding each other in united witness to their faith.

I see a sign

flowers growing on a bombed out site.

The sign - an empty cross.

My Sisters and Brothers we are called to celebrate signs of hope so that we may ,as Paul says in Romans, abound in hope' and thus be strengthened in our common faith,

- I take back to England the gift of hope you have given me in the signs of reconciliation - the reconciliation of memories - with the aboriginal peoples and their response of generosity;

this service is a sign of hope - a sign of our shared faith and hope;

the fellowship of the National Council of Churches in Australia is a sign of hope in the middle of our church divisions;

our celebration a few says ago of a decade of women's solidarity with women is a sign of hope;

the fifty years together in the fellowship of churches that make up the World Council of Churches that we celebrated on the 20th of September is a sign of hope.

As we travel from the Assembly in Canberra to the Assembly in Harare we celebrate together the theme: Turn to God; Rejoice in hope. The hope that we shall rejoice in together at Harare, is the

hope that knows that in the midst of brokenness, in the midst of the groaning of creation, life will triumph over death – the sure knowledge that God is – that the Son of God died and rose again for us – and that by the power of the Holy Spirit, God will bring to pass all the glory – the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

This is the hope symbolised in the shattered pieces of the pots that we will take with us - the sure hope that in the midst of brokenness and in the midst of the groaning of creation there is and will be life unending.

This is our common hope, this is our common faith. 'In hope we are saved.' Let us rejoice in hope.

AMEN