



There is hope in Jesus

Dear friends,

A couple of years ago Melvyn Bragg hosted a discussion on Radio 4 about 'Hope'. In our culture, probably as a result of our Christian heritage, we tend to think of hope as an unalloyed virtue but down through the centuries philosophers have been divided over the nature of hope. According to Greek legend, the god Zeus, presented Pandora (whose name means 'every gift') as a gift to Epimetheus. This may seem like a kind gesture, except Zeus did this as an act of revenge because Epimetheus' brother, Prometheus, had stolen fire from heaven. And indeed the gift of Pandora turned out to be a curse, she opened a jar or box under her care and the evils of the world spilled out. The last 'gift' to emerge from the box was Hope, which has led to some debate over its nature: Is hope an evil like all the other evils that came out of the box? Or is hope a redemptive gift that provides some comfort to us as we undergo the various trials and difficulties that life throws at us?

The way we use the word 'hope' today reinforces its ambiguous character, for its modern usage demonstrates that we do not believe hope provides us with any solid or concrete reassurance for the future. We use hope to communicate a vain longing for something that may or may not come to pass: "I hope we win the World Cup this year!" In this sense hoping for something can prove to be a torturous experience. In popular culture a line springs to mind from the film *The Shawshank Redemption*: "Hope is a dangerous thing; hope can drive a man insane." Longing for better days when there is no guarantee they will come can be cruel.

Over this past year, many of us will have felt at times like life is hopeless. For some of us the thought of reuniting with our family, socialising with our friends, or even getting back to church has been the hope that has kept us going. Many of us have put our hope in the advent of a vaccine. Now I don't mean to sound negative, and I am tremendously grateful to God for the wonders of modern technology, but are we hoping that a vaccine will solve all our problems when it may not? We don't know for sure whether a vaccine will mean a complete return to normal life. I hope it does! But to trust that hope, may be to trust a fickle mistress, who may yet let us down. In the early days of lockdown, I had a conversation with my postman who asked, "Where has the church gone?" His point was that at the very moment

when many people were feeling hopeless, the church nationally appeared to have nothing to say, in fact, worse, it went into hiding.

Now many people would say that the Christian hope is another of those vain longings for better days. But this is not the case; the authors of the New Testament were a subversive bunch, who took a Greek concept and filled it with new meaning. In the New Testament, hope is not used in the sense of a vain longing for a possible better future, but hope is used to describe a sure and certain future that is guaranteed by Jesus. Hope is an unalloyed virtue because it refers not to a possible future but a certain one. When Christians hope, we hope for something that is definitely going to happen. We have a better hope than hope in a vaccine. And no matter what happens this hope remains. The apostle Paul says:

“If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead...”

The Christian hope is not like secular hope. The Christian hope is rooted in the historical reality that Jesus defeated death, and because Jesus defeated death, we who trust in Jesus will one day do the same. Our hope is a future guaranteed by the resurrection of Jesus. Even if the vaccine lets us down, which I hope it doesn't, we still have every reason to be hopeful. And that is a hope, which is worth sharing and which our world, particularly at this time, desperately needs to hear. True hope is not in a vaccine, it is in Jesus.

With love in Him,

Chris