2-part Sermon on hope

**Part 1**

We are thinking about hope this morning.

Since I have been ill, hope has felt very significant to me, in a way it wasn’t before. Charles Spurgeon, the famous Baptist preacher once said that, “Hope itself is like a star – not to be seen in the sunshine of prosperity, and only to be discovered in the night of adversity.” So, perhaps this explains why I have been noticing it particularly.

It may be that we only really pay attention to hope when things aren’t going so well, but hope is recognised as an extremely important part of a person’s well-being in medical and psychological circles.

It’s not surprising then that the Bible has a lot to say about hope.

English can be a very woolly language but hope in the Bible means: ‘trust’, ‘expectation’, and ‘confidence’.

1 Peter 3: 15 says that we should,

**‘Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have’.**

So, it sounds as if we should know something about ‘our hope’.

As I’ve thought about hope it seems to me that both the past and the future have an important part to play. This morning we’re going to do things a little differently and split the sermon in two. In this first part we’re going to consider the past and then after a song we’re going to think about the future and how that impacts our hope.

Our hope is rooted in the past.

In recent studies psychologists have verified that looking back on past experiences can be extremely helpful.

Their suggestion is to reflect on your life, and as you do so you should reflect on the fact that you have coped with, and dealt with, every single difficulty and challenge in your life until now. So, as you face your current challenges you should remind yourself of that. They say that this helps with confidence, courage and resilience.

If they had looked at the Bible they would have found that this is not a new thought. The Israelites often did this. As you read through the Old Testament you see that they repeated to one another the Exodus and other stories of how God had helped them in the past. The Psalms are particularly rich with this sort of storytelling. Just read Psalm 136 – we’ve sung some of this already this morning:

A paraphrase would read ‘Give thanks to the Lord for he is good, his love endures forever…he made the Universe, he rescued us from Egypt, he led us through the wilderness, he conquered our enemies and settled us in the Promised Land, he cares for us and feeds us…Give thanks to God his love endures forever.

For the Israelites, remembering and retelling the stories of how God had been faithful in the past encouraged their hope in the future.

As the Old Testament is the written record of an oral history, you can imagine the Israelites facing some problem and someone in the group saying…’But remember when God..,’. They had been in bad situations before and God had been with them, He would be again.

We have these stories, as well as those of the New Testament to encourage us too. We also have our own stories of hope as a church. How God as been faithful to us over the years – these are good to remember and tell again. We do this not to paint a rosy picture of ‘the good old days’ but as we reflect on how God has acted in the past, we are assured of his character. I am so grateful for Emily and Heather being willing to tell their stories this morning – their stories encourage and enrich us.

What I believe about someone’s character affects how I interpret their current interactions with me, and it’s the same with our understanding of God. What we believe about God’s character in the past has implications for how we will interpret His dealings with us in the present.

In the week before my Mum died she said to me, ‘I’ve always thought God was angry with me, but I know now how much he loves me. I want to be with Jesus.’ A changed understanding of God’s character impacted her present hope.

The Israelites regularly reminded themselves and each other of God’s faithfulness, strength, goodness and love.

Listen to part of Psalm 92:

**It is good to praise the Lord
    and make music to your name, O Most High,
2proclaiming your love in the morning
    and your faithfulness at night,
3to the music of the ten-stringed lyre
    and the melody of the harp.**

**4For you make me glad by your deeds, Lord;
    I sing for joy at what your hands have done.
5How great are your works, Lord,
    how profound your thoughts!**

Part of what we are doing this morning, and every time we meet together, is reminding ourselves and each other of God’s character, from the Bible and from our own individual and corporate experiences.

Hope lies in the memory of God’s previous goodness to us.

**‘Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good, His faithful love endures forever.’**

Part 2

Our understanding of God’s character and our stories of His faithfulness and goodness working in the past are the groundwork of our hope. But another part of our history – the life, death and resurrection of Christ not only inhabits our history but also reaches into our future.

Let’s read from 1 Peter 1.

**3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, 5 who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. 6 In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. 7 These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed. 8 Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, 9 for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.**

**Miss 10-12**

**13 Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming. 14 As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. 15 But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; 16 for it is written: “Be holy, because I am holy.”**

**17 Since you call on a Father who judges each person’s work impartially, live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear.** **18 For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, 19 but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. 20 He was chosen before the creation of the world but was revealed in these last times for your sake. 21 Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.**

Our hope is about Jesus. Jesus was raised from the dead, and because of that we can be confident about the future.

Jesus is God incarnate; lived to fulfil the purposes of Israel; died to redeem all of creation; was raised as the firstborn of the new creation which will be fulfilled when he comes again. He is ascended to heaven, seated at the right hand of God as Lord of everything.

This is our hope.

Jesus is risen and is going to come again - and when He does everything will be as God has planned – His Kingdom will fully come.

The believers to whom this letter was written were living under Roman occupation and oppression, Nero was Caesar and he proclaimed that he was Lord and ruled with force. Life wasn’t fair, was often cruel and contained much suffering – the Christians were being misunderstood, persecuted, imprisoned and put to death. Peter would be one of them.

Christians throughout history have found comfort and strength in knowing that ultimately love, justice, mercy, grace and wholeness, every aspect of God’s Kingdom, will win and that sin and death will be no more. The Kingdom of God will fully come when Jesus returns – when every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

This could sound like ‘pie, in the sky when you die’. How does this hope affect how we live now, as well as what our future holds?

Perhaps an advert can help. New Year always brings a host of ‘stop smoking’, ‘go on a diet’, ‘be a better you’ adverts and programmes. The advert you are about to see was part of this at Christmas-New Year 2010/11.

**Show the advert.** [**http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zhuf5i1Lnbk**](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zhuf5i1Lnbk)

The advert shows the nature of this hope we are to have. Without the ‘future hope’ the girl would be trying to stop smoking, fingers crossed, trying to get through each day, using up all her supplies of willpower. But her future self brings her the knowledge that there will come a day when she will have stopped smoking - it will be achieved - this brings a different sort of strength and encouragement. It doesn’t mean that it won’t still be hard – she’ll still need to beat her cravings and not have the next cigarette, but she knows that ultimately there will be success (and a new boyfriend), even if there will be some blips along the way. She can have confidence.

Our future hope that Jesus is going to arrive back and make all things well doesn’t just give us hope for future joy and comfort-it gives us courage for present trials, and strength for current fights. Knowing and understanding our future hope also results in a call for current holiness and Godly living. Peter called his readers to ‘Be Holy’, and we have that same call.

This future hope gave them, and can give us courage, strength and faith that we can be changed and that we can make a difference too. We are not just marking time until Jesus comes back. We are part of working towards that coming Kingdom. We are working in a world that is not yet finished, a world of possibilities in which we are called to serve the future promised truth, righteousness and peace.

The power that raised Jesus from the dead is in us, and we are called in that power to be part of bringing God’s Kingdom to Tillicoultry, to Scotland, to the world NOW.

So, Hope is where our shared history meets with our faith and understanding of what has been achieved by Christ’s death and resurrection.

This past and future gives us a place to stand now. It strengths us in trouble and fills us with joy and gives us good news to share in a world that needs that Good News.

As we look back through history and the story of our lives we find God there, and as we think of the future we have confidence that God is there too. Emmanuel, I AM is with us always – nothing can separate us from His love which is higher and deeper and longer and wider than we can imagine. In every aspect of our living, wherever we go, whatever we do – in our best experiences, our worst experiences, our joy, our pain, our despair, our sorrow, God – the Triune Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer is with us.

**Testimony**

Sermons are often preached to oneself first. In looking back, what is the bedrock of my hope? Over my years as a Christian I have read and re-read the Bible. I’ve seen how these stories have inspired and challenged others, which has spoken hope and faith to me as well. I’ve seen God at work in my life and in the life of others. As a church, we’ve seen God at work – in individual situations and in our life together. There have been good things, and we’ve known God at work through difficulties, losses and sadnesses.

I was looking back at things this week and found to my surprise that I preached my first ever sermon on the 4th November 2012, in St Ninians on the subject of ‘Hope’. I re-read it and much of what I said then I would still say today – it’s just got a much sharper edge today.

6 years ago I was putting my first tentative toes into the waters of preaching and starting to ask questions of ‘what’s next’ of God, that led to going to college and the Board of Ministry. That seemed like a journey of hope, as well as of faith and courage. 6 years down the line it all looks a bit different. I’ve had to leave college and put down particular dreams of ministry.

About the same time as the church ceiling came down I found a lump in my abdomen. After various investigations it was found to be a sarcoma, a connective tissue cancer, which I had major surgery to remove in April 2017. The day after the operation a stitch in my arterial graft popped and I had to have emergency surgery to stop me bleeding to death. As I was rushed back to theatre I knew myself to be safe. The words of Ephesians 3 filled my head, how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and I knew He was with me – I was not afraid.

I recovered from that, and began a slow and steady recovery, and went back to college in January to continue my training.

Then in May this year, we were told that my disease had returned, and cannot be cured. I have had, and continue to have, chemotherapy to try and keep it at bay for as long as possible, and I’m about to start radiotherapy to manage some of the symptoms.

So, what about hope?

I know that God is good and faithful. I know that He loves me and is always working for good to come out of every situation, and I do not believe He has given me this disease.

I know that God has given me His peace that passes understanding. I am not afraid. Having nearly died already, I know the truth of Emmanuel – God was, is and will be with me always. I am not afraid of dying, but I don’t want to – I love my life. I feel so sad about all sorts of things and there have been lots of mini-bereavements – having to lay dreams down, and possibilities shrinking, but I know that I am safe and loved.

And I know that God can still use me to see His Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. I have opportunities to be with people in hospital waiting rooms, to talk to consultants and nurses to ‘give a reason for my hope’.

And I know that Jesus is the resurrection and the life, and I am ‘confident of this, that he who began a good work in me will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.’

I read something recently which sums up how I feel about things perfectly:

“‘All shall be well’ means that even if I make my bed in Sheol, God is with me. It means that even if I dwell in the remotest part of the sea, even there, God’s right hand upholds me. It means that even when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we don’t have to be afraid – not because nothing bad will happen to us in this life, but because God is with us in anything and everything that happens. Somehow everything that happens to us in this life can form and shape and prepare us for life beyond this world as well.”

This is my hope.