

The Hulsean Sermon:
The Vices and Virtues of Hope

Nick Austin SJ

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‘Always be ready to give an account of the hope that is in you.’ (Cf. 1 Peter 15)

I first became interested in the question of hope when I had the opportunity to teach a service-learning course at Boston College, a Jesuit University in the United States. Alongside study of personal and social ethics, students committed to eight hours a week working with the homeless, accompanying those recovering from addiction, or tutoring a child from a disadvantaged background. Due to the demanding nature of the course, it tended to attract idealistic students, those who wanted to make a difference, to change the world. It was also the year that a Sandra Bullock film, *The Blind Side*, was released. If you have not seen the movie, you know the genre. A well-meaning wealthy Christian Republican woman fosters an African-American teenager born on the wrong side of the tracks, and shepherds him to American Football glory. Based on a true story. Many of my students hoped, like Sandra Bullock’s character, to give a future to at least one person, to save a soul. A worthy aim.

Six weeks later, everyone in the class was depressed. One student was working with a ten-year old girl on a literacy programme, with the hope she would make something of her education, but as she was considered disruptive, the child was kicked off the literacy programme. Another was working with drug addicts, and was discouraged by the fact that many would have good periods of sobriety but then relapse, and the staff seemed resigned to that pattern. Yet another was working with the street homeless, to help them into housing, but often the participants ended back on the streets, so there was not much sense of progress there either. My students had been unprepared for the multiple challenges facing the individuals they were attempting to help. They were also awakened to the systemic causes of their disadvantage. The American Dream to which my students had hitherto unthinkingly subscribed, that anyone can make it if they worked hard enough, had lost its deceptive sheen and now appeared a cruel falsehood. The Blind Side indeed. My students no longer wanted to be like Sandra Bullock’s character. They realised they weren’t going to save anyone.

Paradoxically, that moment of disillusionment turned out to be the pivot on which the true learning of the course hinged. The students knew they needed to set aside any superiority complex, acknowledge their own privilege, and accept their own limitations. They began to learn what it means to be committed to a person without expectation of reciprocity. Above all, they perceived the need for something deeper than the optimism with which they began. That brittle optimism had been shattered by contact with hard

reality. The motive force they needed was something at once more realistic and more resilient. Together, we examined whether what they needed was not hope. For hope is not a mere opinion about the likelihood of future success, but a quality of spirit that drives one to seek the greater good even in the face of difficulty. Only hardwood hope, not brittle optimism, could sustain them in their commitment to the people they were serving, when tangible results were no longer guaranteed. By the end of the course, two semesters later, the students had failed in their original goals, but were grateful nonetheless. What they had learned about humility, fidelity, love, and above all hope, they reflected, they would carry with them for the rest of their lives.

I want to begin by saying, then, that we will not be able to give an account of the hope that is in us if we confuse it with optimism. At its most basic, optimism is the tendency to persist in the expectation that things will turn out well. The origin story, the 'prequel' one might say, to modern optimism lies, perhaps surprisingly, in theology, or rather what I would describe as a theological mistake. It can be traced back to the Gottfried Wilhelm Von Leibniz, who famously claimed that this world is the best of all possible worlds. On his view, anything less than perfection in creation would be a slight on God's goodness and power. This view was famously and devastatingly parodied by Voltaire in *Candide*. Voltaire wrote this satire shortly after the Seven Years War and the 1755 Lisbon earthquake. Today we might think of the Ukraine war and the earthquake in Turkey and Syria. Voltaire mercilessly parodies Leibniz in the figure of Professor Pangloss, who repetitively insists, in the face of all evidence to the contrary, that 'all is for the best' in 'the best of all possible worlds.' Leibniz's theodicy, Voltaire is saying, is as much a moral as a metaphysical failing: a failure in compassion. If we are to hang on to hope in the face of real human suffering, it needs to be a different kind of hope than the blind optimism of Leibniz's worldview.

Few today subscribe to Leibniz's absurdly optimistic cosmology, and so modern defenders of optimism look for an alternative justification. Optimism is today lauded by positive psychologists as a quality that helps deal with stress, reduces the risk of depression and anxiety, and can even lead to greater success in education or business. All good things, no doubt. Yet, optimism is what the Christian tradition would call the false similitude of a virtue: a plausible imitation that turns out not to be the genuine article, the real McCoy. The reason I would say optimism is a counterfeit virtue is that it does not *reliably* live in the real world, it does not track the truth.

Always be ready to give an account of the hope that is in you.

If true hope is not optimism, what is it? One reason we may confuse optimism and hope is that, as a culture, we can be biased towards success. As teachers, as parents, we naturally want young people to succeed. Optimistically, we do what we can to prepare them for success. But we do less, I think, to prepare them for failure. And consequently, we do less to prepare them for hope. For while optimism wants nothing to do with failure, hope, dare I say, cannot be had without it.

I've often been struck by JK Rowling's well-known Commencement speech at Harvard University. The context for this speech is a time and place saturated in success. One

of the world's most successful novelists addresses a cohort of successful graduating students from one of the world's most successful universities, each of them about to embark on a career full of the promise of success. Yet, JK Rowling nevertheless chooses to talk about the fringe benefits of failure. She recalls a difficult moment in her own life, before she had written Harry Potter, when, as she puts it, 'An exceptionally short-lived marriage had imploded, and I was jobless, a lone parent, and as poor as it is possible to be in modern Britain, without being homeless.' Yet she finds in it a new freedom, because her greatest fears had been realised, yet she was still alive, she still had a daughter whom she adored, and she still had friends who stuck with her even during the dark times. She also had 'an old typewriter and a big idea.' Failure therefore meant, for JK Rowling, a 'stripping away of the inessential' as she learned to pour her energies into what really mattered to her. In a striking phrase, she says that 'rock bottom became the solid foundation of my life.' When the optimistic hopes of her parents were not fulfilled, a truer, more resilient hope was born.

I'm grateful for this invitation to come to Cambridge and give the Hulsean Sermon. Many thanks to the University, to Revd Canon Jutta Brueck here at the University Church, to Tim Milner, and to Catherine Arnold, the Master of St Edmund's College, for the wonderful hospitality. And thank you to all of you for being here this morning. The Hulsean sermon originates in the will of John Hulse, of St John's College, who died in 1790. According to his will, the preacher is to elaborate on, in a wonderfully eighteenth century turn of phrase, 'The Truth and Excellence of Revealed Religion, or the Evidence of Christianity'.

What, then, does the Bible and the tradition tell us about hope? Much of what we glean about hope from the Bible comes in the form of narrative, and the narrative is intimately tied up, not only with the resurrection, but the cross. Hope, like Christ, suffers and dies before it is born anew in a purified form.

In the story of Emmaus from Luke's gospel (Luke 24:13-35), we walk with Cleopas and the other disciple away from Jerusalem after the crucifixion of Jesus. At this moment of the apparently catastrophic failure of the Jesus movement, we hear the unforgettable words, 'We had hoped that he would be the one to redeem Israel.' *We had hoped*. The disciples had probably optimistically hoped that Jesus would liberate them from Roman dominion and restore Israelite self-rule. A measurable objective, the kind of impact to be included in the strategic plan. This dream died cruelly with Jesus on the cross. The crucifixion of the disciples' initial hope is, however, an occasion of grace. Until this point, their memory of the way God is at work in their lives lies dormant. They had the testimony of the women disciples, but do not yet believe them; they have heard of the empty tomb, but do not understand its significance; they have known the stories of the Torah and the Prophets all their lives, and yet still they do not understand the way that God works in human experience. Christ, nevertheless, gives them the gift of *anamnesis*, the unforgetting of God's saving deeds. And so their hope returns, as they renew their faith in the faithful God who never abandons his people. But, and this is a crucial point, the hope that rises is different from the hope that had died. Their new hope has been forged and tempered in the fire of the paschal mystery. This living hope is also more in tune with the way God works, with the kind of Kingdom Jesus came to proclaim, with who Jesus really is. This living hoping

is more at home in a world marked by tragedy and suffering. Above all, it is a hope that is born by the realisation that God's faithfulness is stronger than death.

I do not want to focus purely on the individual task and gift of hope. The Truth and Evidence of Revealed Religion and the Evidence of Christianity, in those phrases from John Hulse's will, become manifest when, through the way we reflect God's faithfulness, we become ministers of hope to others.

A few years ago I had the privilege of listening to the guests and practitioners at the Jesuit Refugee Service, Wapping, in East London. To be a refugee is a project of hope, hope for a better life, free from persecution and fear. Yet those who seek asylum on our shores can experience a hostile immigration system that can be a severe and even systematic threat to human hope. The first letter from the Home Office may inform an asylum seeker that they are in the country illegally, and that, if they think otherwise, they need to provide documentary evidence. The system can deny an asylum seeker their right to work, the capacity to find accommodation, the ability to study, and can even detain them indefinitely. There is therefore a 'learned helplessness' that the system can instil in asylum seekers through the systematic denial of agency. As one person said to me, 'They destroy hope, the system destroys hope.'

The Jesuit Refugee Service is a faith-based organisation that sees hope as one of its central values. It aims not only to serve and advocate for refugees, but to accompany them: walking alongside them, listening to them, being present to them.

In accompanying asylum seekers, exhortations to hope can ring hollow: there is no use reassuring someone that there is light at the end of the long dark tunnel. But the simple practice of accompaniment, of being with another, being present, without immediate intention to fix or solve anything, can be a powerful restorative for hope. Refugees who visit the Jesuit Refugee Service in London say that they value not only the 'basic material provision' the service offers, but also the *way* they are treated: they are called by name, eat hot meals together with the workers, and spend time in simple conversation.¹ When you know you are not alone, but there are those that are with you and for you, it may become less impossible to hang on to hope.

In a sermon on hope today, it would be odd if nothing were said about one of the major threats to hope, namely, the environmental crisis. Hope is especially associated with youth, but in my experience with students, many young adults now feel anxious and grief-stricken when they look at the trajectory we are on. They are tempted to give up in despair. Is there any hope? Daniel Nelson is an environmental ethicist I admire, and he thinks not. He tells us that he gets angry with writer after writer telling us how bad things are, how climate change is accelerating, species are dying, pollution is increasing, economics is failing to respond, and politics isn't working; and then, at the end of the book, we are told that there is still time to change everything and reverse the downward spiral. That's not realistic, Nelson

¹ Anna Rowlands, *For our welfare and not for our harm*, a faith-based report on the experience of the refugee and refugee support community at JRS UK 2017–2019. https://www.jrsuk.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/For-our-welfare-and-not-for-our-harm_Dr-Anna-RowlandsJRS-UK.pdf

says. Better to give up hope entirely. Because when we give up hope, he says, we are paradoxically freed to live justly and lovingly and mercifully, simply because it is good and beautiful and right so to do.

In some ways, I believe Nelson is right. If we are too attached to outcomes, to facile ideals like 'creating a better future,' or 'making the world a better place,' we are again lapsing into optimism, and so we become liable to discouragement when we realise such ideals are illusory. But I believe Nelson has confused hope with optimism. Optimism is indeed unwarranted in the face of the multiple ecological and social crises we face. But hope is both possible and necessary. It is necessary, since it is the only quality that will help us both look with sober eyes at the situation, and help bring about the ecological conversion we need today. Only hope spurs us on to action when things get really difficult. There is no other moral oxygen that can help us keep on living and working for the good when there are these kinds of challenge. And hope is possible, because even now we can hope to live well, and to flourish in a way that we are not used to flourishing, not through consumption or status, but through living well with other humans, with nature, before God. There is always the possibility of acting with compassion, with justice, with love. For people who have hope have that deeper sense of meaning that makes it worthwhile to act even when the immediate outcomes of their action are not so visible.

Always be ready to give an account of the hope that is in you. Always be ready to tell the story of the hope that is in you. I have tried to tell the story, not of optimistic hope that expects things to turn out well and successfully, but of the resilient, sober but joyful hope that finds meaning even in the midst of the most apparently hopeless situations. And I have described those who become ministers of hope reflecting God's faithfulness to them in the most trying of circumstances by accompanying them. Easy to say, less easy to live. But when we do, then we will be giving an account of the hope that is in us, not merely in words, but in our actions and our lives.

Revd Dr Nick Austin SJ is a Jesuit priest and Master of Campion Hall, the Jesuit postgraduate Hall in the University of Oxford.