

Christian hope for our planet

Elaine Storkey challenges us to pursue our calling, with hope



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In everyday life, hope can often sound like little more than wishful thinking. We might say: “I hope my lottery number comes up” but statistically that’s unlikely, and we’d be idiots to vest too much faith in it. Or hope can fly in the face of reality, like someone hoping they’ve remembered to turn the gas off; because it’s either off or on, and no amount of hope can change the situation.

Hope can also be a blind belief that things will get better when all the evidence suggests otherwise. We see this in relation to climate change: “There’s nothing to worry about; the Earth’s temperature goes up and down. Just hope it gets sorted out.” Yet such hope is completely ineffective; whether based in ignorance or apathy it denies the impact of both our actions and inaction. It reveals an indifference to loss of bio-diversity, destructive breakdown of ecosystems, coastal erosion, erratic weather conditions, and unconcern for those most vulnerable to climate crises.

All these forms of hope offer us very little: at best a sort of escapism, shoulder-shrugging.

Christians are not immune to misunderstanding hope and we have our own ways of getting it wrong, particularly in relation to climate change. I’ve met many Christians who over-spiritualise hope, seeing it as always related to the spiritual reality of our eternal future – rather than to the everyday concerns of the material Creation we live in. Yet the Bible doesn’t present hope as an escape from the created order, but as vital in bringing about its renewal. Another misunderstanding is when we vest our hope in God solving our global problems for us, rather than taking action ourselves. Believing that the future is in God’s hands does not absolve us from working out our own salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12). We do not work for our salvation, Christ has done that, but we work it out in our world, by confronting the vital issues of our day with wisdom and spiritual insight.

So, what is hope in a biblical framework? In 1 Corinthians 13, St Paul speaks of three characteristics which are crucial to our Christian life. When the outward forms of ritual and worship are stripped away, when prophecies end and tongues cease and knowledge fades, faith, hope and love remain. This tells us

that hope is central to Christian identity; it’s not some abstract quality that appears from nowhere. It is never free-standing but is intertwined with faith and love. Faith in God’s goodness and love makes hope possible and love binds hope and faith together. Hope is therefore anchored in the God of love, in the Creator and Sustainer of the universe; it is confidence in the character and promises of God which have been fulfilled in Christ and sustained by the Holy Spirit. This hope must inevitably lead to action, for it can never be just a passive affirmation. When the hope we cling to is grounded in God’s love for the world, and God’s heart for justice, we are called to care for Creation and to love our neighbour as ourselves.

Hope is evident in every part of our biblical story; in Creation, in fighting sin and temptation, and in redemption. Hope is breathed into Creation as God brings a world into being out of nothing, and the Spirit broods over the face of the waters, ready for new life to burst forth (Genesis 1:2). It is echoed in Jesus as St John’s Gospel identifies him as the incarnate Word through whom all things were made. So, as the stars and heavens tell the glory of God and the Earth shows God’s handiwork, hope lives within the very beauty of all that is made. Hope is reinforced when God declares his authorship and love of Creation – every animal of the forest belongs to God, and the cattle on a thousand hills. God knows every bird in the mountains and owns the insects in the field (Psalm 50:10-11). The Psalms so often delight in God’s created order, portraying the whole of Creation shouting in hopeful gladness at God’s presence: the sea roars, the floods clap their hands and the hills sing together for joy (Psalm 98:7-9). Hope in the context of Creation is both majestic and poignant, cosmic and intimate.

This vision of hope embedded in Creation, however, is a far cry from most of what we see in our world. For human sin has intervened and marred the whole of history. Today, we are living in times of indifference, apathy and greed towards the world God has made. In an essay entitled “*Jesus died to save the planet*”, Paul Kunert suggests that we have put corporate, individual, and national self-interest above the good of the Earth and our neighbour, and self ahead of God’s glory. Because of our broken relationship with the planet we seem bent on turning it into a dead wasteland. So much has been destroyed and much more is on the verge of extinction. Yet, hope is never annihilated. Although people attempt to displace God and disparage Creation, in the biblical story, hope still remains. Hope leads Creation itself to groan and wait for redemption (Romans 8:22-23).

Throughout Scripture we find that God never intended to discard the marred Creation, but promised to redeem and restore it. That is why in our biblical narrative sin never has the last word; hope is clearly renewed in God’s act of redeeming

the world through the life and death of Jesus. Just as this redemption is offered to our human lives, it extends hope to the whole of Creation. And we must work with God to offer new life to those areas of the world which have been so badly damaged. It is a job for all humankind. When Christians repent for any collusion we have had with harmful systems that exploit and abuse God’s world, we are given freedom to join others in working for a redemptive and hopeful future.

Hope and our care of the planet

We know we are up against world leaders who work in defiance of God’s commission to the human Creation to care for the rest. We recognize the power of mammon in controlling laws and policies within nations, and the human corruption which overrides the norms of justice for God’s world. We mourn the increasing disappearance of species, the melting of the tundra and the polar ice caps, and those areas of our planet where the loss is irreversible. Yet we also know there is still work for us to do in calling for justice and influencing others to become advocates for life-enriching change.

God’s Creation has been well-endowed with healing faculties. Hope teaches us to recognise these and support the development of technology which can enhance the planet’s own ability to grow and flourish. Today we witness with gratitude the work of many skilled human minds who acknowledge their shared creaturehood with animals, plants, mountains, seas in a universe that is home to us all. Hope teaches us, and them, that we do not need to plunder the Earth, but can replant and renew those areas desperately needed as habitats for vulnerable species. We do not need to ignore CO₂ emissions, turn a blind eye to fossil fuel extraction or perpetuate landfill for many alternatives to each of these are now available. Hope also teaches us to listen to our contemporary prophets, to encourage those who are committed to finding green, innovative solutions. It helps us to give prayerful support to those who speak truth to power and work night and day for a better world. However discouraged we might be, hope gives us the means to continue our calling and do whatever we can to honour and love this wonderful world which God has entrusted to us. ■



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