

Jeremiah 2: 4-13

Hebrews 13: 1-8, 15-16

Luke 14: 1, 7-14

When I die, I say to my family, would you scatter my ashes on the stretch of the Cornish coast between St Ives and Zennor, a place where we walked when the children were little?
I don't know if you know it?

At this point, the South West Coast path drops down to sea level.

It is remote and wild.

Waves crash on the black rocks sending up big plumes of spray.

A great place to be for eternity!

And then when my family have done with that part of the proceedings, I suggest they wander back to St Ives for a fine sea food lunch washed down with a good few bottles of Chablis.

Hmm, the tricky subject of death.

A bit of a taboo in our society.

We live our lives – very often – in denial of the inevitable reality.

Certainly it is not a concern of the young – unless we send them to war – but there comes a point in one's life, doesn't there, when one starts to think about it more?

And personal circumstances have got me thinking about it a bit more not to mention tragedy in Italy or on our beaches this week.

'How long have I got?' we wonder.

30 years, 20 years, 10 years. Less?

I don't know about you but I am not a little outraged that God made it so.

I know not everyone feels this way but I do.

Edna St Vincent Millay, an American poet of the early twentieth century, who I am told lived a 'bohemian life' in New York's Greenwich Village, she captures how I feel in her poem 'Dirge without music':

"I am not resigned to shutting away of loving hearts in the hard ground. So it is, and so it will be, for so it has been...'

"I know. But I do not approve. And I am not resigned."

“Down, down, down into the darkness of the grave. Gently they go, the beautiful, the tender, the kind. Quietly they go, the intelligent, the witty, the brave”.

(cited in Janet Morley, *Our Last Awakening: Poems for Living in the Face of Death*, SPCK, 2016, p. 90)

The question I have – and which I want to explore with you today – is how do we speak of hope in this context – in this context – and how do we not.

In John’s gospel, Jesus talks of ‘preparing a place for us’ (John 14).

And it is a nice image.

One much beloved at funeral services.

But what does it mean?

To talk in this way – to turn over the subject that I am looking at here – is to get into what is known as eschatology, often referred to as the study of ‘last things’ or ‘end times’.

The real challenge for us as Christians as we think about hope is not to lapse into fantasy.

Projection of our very natural wishes and desires.

It is all too easy and it can make Christianity sound ridiculous, which isn’t good for lots of reasons, not least mission.

It is also a form of idolatry, which was the concern of our first reading from Jeremiah.

Turning God into something God is not

So, what might be a more productive way to think about hope.

Productive albeit I suspect challenging but which will take us beyond the realm of fantasy.

The Christian faith teaches us, I think, that we need to look in the most counter-intuitive places...

I wonder where...

Try, Gethsemane and Golgotha – the place of Jesus’ crucifixion.

And their equivalents in our own lives.

It is here that we find hope.

Finger-tip hope. Against the odds hope. But hope which is worth having.

It is not hope that cancels out the awfulness of the cross nor the harshness of our own, all too-short, lives.

But hope nevertheless.

So what is going on here? How might it be so?

At Gethsemane:

'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want'

And at Golgotha, on the cross:

'Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing'

And to his mother:

'Woman, here is your son'

And to the disciple:

'Here is your mother'.

So this is not an eschatology, or a view of end times, which projects our 'very human wishes onto a blank screen of the future'

Rather, it is an eschatology that disciplines our desires and fixes our attention on God (see Benjamin Myers, *Christ the Stranger: The theology of Rowan Williams*, T&T Clark 2012, p. 95).

'Not what I want but what you want'

And a concern for the welfare of others right up until the end.

This is immensely hard.

But it is surely what the whole of our lives are a preparation for.

Christian discipleship.

Disciplining our desires and fixing our attention on God.

Hope which is to be found most clearly – except it not that clear, it is easily missed – but hope nevertheless found in situations of seeming catastrophe....on the cross.

But again, we may ask, what is going on here? How might it be so?

Perhaps I can put it like this.

It is only in situations of catastrophe – or at least catastrophe may be the crucial prompt – that we hold ourselves open to the future as it truly is.

We stop projecting our own wishes.

We see clearly.

We let God be God.

Which for most of the time, let's be honest, we struggle to do.

So what does that imply for us here and now – today?

Hope in the face of death is to be had.

But it is unlikely to be in the usual places.

Seeing clearly takes time – a life time. (And my word, I am not there yet.)

It requires us to be brave, bold, attentive, and expectant.

I hope these words resonate...

To constantly work at disciplining our desires, evacuating our fantasies.

Fixing our eyes on God, a source of wonder both in life and death. Straining to grasp the rhythms of how things most deeply are.

Our readings from the epistle to the Hebrews and Luke talk about hospitality.

‘Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing’

Or, in Luke:

‘...when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you.’

...at least not in material terms, we may add.

It may be that you think that these verses have nothing to do with what I have been talking about.

But that is not the case.

What happens when we entertain a ‘stranger’, ‘the other’, someone different from our-selves?

Well, it is there, hidden in the language, the very words we use.

When we entertain, or spend time with, ‘the other’, the stranger – if we are attentive to them – our self, with all its fantasies and projections...

...all the things which get in the way of seeing clearly...

...of seeing God, our hope beyond hope....

Our self is dislodged.

May be not hugely but just enough....

...A small step on the road towards disciplining our desires and fixing our attention on God – the source of our being beyond ourselves.

Michael Ramsey, former Archbishop of Canterbury, when asked to compile a final anthology of his writings, was asked by his editor what he would most like included.

His editor later described what happened.

There was a moment’s silence before Ramsey replied simply: ‘Tell them about heaven!’

'That's where we are going; that is what we were created for. Heaven is the meaning of our life here'

And as he spoke 'there was a light in his eyes and an expression of glory on his face'.

(cited in Vernon White, *Life Beyond Death: Threads of Hope in Faith, Life and Theology*, DLT, 2006, p. 74)

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.