

Community of Profound Hope

Readings: Genesis 12:1-3; 1Corinthians 15:50-58; John 14:1-6

This is a hopeful sermon. Now this should not be a surprise! Every time a preacher gets in the pulpit there is hope in the air. The preacher hopes that he will make sense and that people will listen. The congregation hope that he won't take too long.

But more seriously, it is perhaps no surprise that I would talk about hope in the difficult times that we face. It has been said that without hope we wither and die, and in the face of changing climate, a challenging economy and perhaps even personal changes, some big, some small, we all need hope.

It should also not be a surprise because Christianity is all about hope. For example Paul can write as he finishes the book of Romans, having explained the faith in great detail, "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." (15:13). You can't get more hopeful than that, a God of hope who causes us to overflow, abound, "cup runneth over" with hope.

But what is the nature of this hope and basis of this hope? If you were to ask most people what the nature of the Christian hope is they would probably say that you go to heaven when you die, the promise of life after death. No surprise there, but this is where things do become surprising: Christian hope is far greater than that. Rather than simply going to heaven when we die, the Bible teaches the hope of resurrection, surprisingly the Bible calls us to hope in life after life after death.

Today I hope that we will be surprised by hope, a profound hope and hope that will truly fire us to live differently now.

RESURRECTION FROM THE DEAD

To better understand the biblical teaching on Christian hope the best place to go to is 1Corinthians 15 for here Paul spells out the basis and nature of Christian hope most fully. It is well worth reading in full so you can check up that what I am saying is there. This is important because what I am going to show you may be different from what you had always imagined or been taught, it may be a little unsettling.

Jesus' Resurrection: At the heart of the Gospel (1-11)

Paul starts, as all true Christian thinking should with the Gospel. And we are told some things about the Gospel, it is a message which saves, which is a hopeful start. But the substance of the Gospel is given in 3-5 "that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve" and then Paul goes on to mention other witnesses including himself.

The Gospel then is about Jesus, who died for sin, was buried, but who was raised from the dead with a body, resurrected as an historical, verifiable event. Here already we find much to give us hope. The Christian hope is not based on a philosophical ideal,

a religious principle, but on what has happened in history. It is not then a pious hope but a profound hope. These verses also remind us that this was all according to the Scriptures. This Gospel is God keeping his promises of salvation, of blessing to all nations, God can be trusted, again this should lead to a profound hope. On this basis alone, based in history as God keeps his promises we can see that Christian hope is far stronger, deeper, and more secure than most people think.

But what is important for us to note here is that it is not a message about Jesus dying and going to heaven, but rather it is about resurrection, about death being undone, about new creation, about Jesus with a body.

It is this message that we are called to believe and by which we are saved. But this message also gives us the road map for what our hope will be, the hope of resurrection, as Paul goes on to show.

Jesus' Resurrection: The first fruits (12-34)

Paul describes Jesus' resurrection as the first fruits "But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep." (20)

The idea of first fruits is that it is the sign that the rest of the harvest was going to come, it was guaranteed. When I first preached on this idea of first fruits the organist at that church very excitedly told me that her chickens had just laid their first eggs. When I preached in the evening there were now 3 eggs. It was a perfect illustration of firstfruits.

In our less agricultural and more entertainment based culture we might think of the trailer which shows that the film is coming, or the lead single which means the new album is coming. Either way Jesus' resurrection is a sign of things to come, as Jesus has been raised, so there is more resurrection to come, our very own resurrection. Whilst resurrection is not easy to believe, a fact of which Paul and his readers are not unaware, it has happened to Jesus is a verifiable fact and it is this that we who follow Jesus look forward to.

Our Resurrection (35-58)

What will our body be like? (35-49)

As Paul writes he imagines the questions that people will ask, in v35 he wonders aloud if someone will ask "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?"

Paul uses analogies from nature that a seed that is planted is not like the plant which follows and there are different kind of bodies, birds, fish, sun and moon and so on. Paul's point seems to be that there are different bodies which are well suited to the situations in which they find themselves. A fish has a body which is good for being in the water but not for being in orbit around a planet.

So our new bodies will be suited to the new reality in which we find ourselves in a new creation. In fact, our new body will be just like the one that Jesus had when he was raised from the dead. Now this is definitely an upgrade on what we have now, Humanity 2.0. This body will be immortal, it will be imperishable, spiritual. It is hard to imagine exactly what this will be like. What a body without death and pain or weakness or infection, and I am hoping without baldness, will be like is hard to imagine. Paul recognises that there is a mystery here, but this is what God will do.

But we need to notice that Paul is here clearly talking about a body, despite the language of spiritual, it is still a body, he uses the word body 9 times in 10 verses. Paul is clearly talking about a material, physical existence. Our future is not to be like Casper the Friendly Ghost but it is much more profound and real than that. As Paul puts it in Philippians 3:21 Jesus "... will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body." The message of Jesus' resurrection is not only our salvation and our hope it is our future.

When do we get it.

Now if this is getting you interested if you are interested in this upgrade, of wanting to sign up for Humanity 2.0 you will want to know when we will get it. Paul tells us that it will happen when Jesus returns in glory, or as Paul puts it here "when the last

trumpet sounds." Those who have died will be raised immortal, those who are still alive will be immediately transformed.

Notice that this does not happen straight away when we die, something else is being described here than just dying and going to heaven. Rather when Jesus returns that is when resurrection takes place and that is when life after life after death starts.

CHRISTIAN HOPE

We should perhaps take stock of what Paul is teaching us here and how it fits in with what we are told elsewhere in the Bible, after all we are talking about what happens to us as believers in Jesus.

When Jesus is on the cross he says to the thief on the cross next to him who shows faith in him that "I tell you truly, today, you will be with me in paradise." In John's Gospel, Jesus says that he goes to prepare a place for us. In Acts Stephen as he dies he says that he sees Jesus in heaven and asks for Jesus to receive his spirit (Acts 7:59). In the book of Revelation the spirits of the believers who have died are with God as they await God.

In this sense it is right for Christians believe that when we die we will go to heaven, it is the promise of Jesus to all who believe in him. So we do believe in life after death, our spirits will go to be with our Saviour.

But this is not the end of the story, our story will be like Jesus' story, he died, was buried, presumably went to heaven, and that he was raised to life in his new, renewed, new creation body. That is what we look forward to and it is so easy for us to forget it. We believe in life after life after death. The book of Revelation ends with a new heaven and a new earth, and not with believers going to be with God in the new heaven, but God coming to his people in his new earth, a return to Eden.

Whilst I was on holiday in January I attended a church and during the service they listed some of the people of the congregation who had died in the past, and as they ended all the people there said "May they rest in peace" and I was feeling a little uncomfortable as it seemed they were praying for the dead, but they then all said with some gusto, "and be raised in glory" and I almost shouted Hallelujah. I didn't because I am an Anglican and we don't do that kind of thing, but **Hallelujah**, that is the real Christian hope, we will rest with Jesus, but we will be raised in glory in the new creation that God will bring when Jesus returns.

The problem with the most common understandings of life after death is that they do not really deal with death. Paul tells us here that death is defeated, that God is victorious over death. If we die and go to heaven is death really defeated? Not really. It is rather like playing hockey with death and he wins and so we go and play chess instead which death can't play. In which case death has not been defeated, simply cheated. If death is to be defeated it has to be on the hockey field so to speak. The biblical view is that death will be defeated, its seeming triumphs will be wound back, those who have died have to be brought back to life, that is when death is defeated, when those of us who have trusted in Jesus who have been resting in peace will be raised in glory where death will be banished and there will be no more mourning, crying or pain for the old order of things will have passed away in the new heaven and the new earth.

There is much that is a mystery here but this is the glorious future which the Christian has, all flowing from understanding the Gospel of Jesus Christ crucified and resurrected.

RESURRECTION OF HOPE

Now we get to the "so what" moment. This may all be very interesting but what do we do with it? Well firstly I should ask you, do you want to be part of this future, this glorious eternal life which has been won for us by Jesus? Then come to Jesus and believe in the gospel of his life, death and resurrection, and the Scripture says this future

will be yours. Then the God of all hope will enable you to overflow with hope. Whatever may happen in this life, through whatever trial you may go through, you will be part of this new creation. It is a profound hope that will sustain you in life.

But there is more than this here, it should transform our life. Notice how Paul ends. You may expect Paul to say since you have such a secure hope then you can relax, you can take it easy, after all the future is all in the bag. But that is not what he says. Rather he says "Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain." (58)

Paul ends by encouraging his readers to get on now with God's work because it is not in vain. What has this to with resurrection? If our hope is that we die and go to heaven then as we are going to a completely different kind of reality then it doesn't really matter what we do, it will simply be left behind. Sadly this is how many Christians have thought and lived, either treating the things of this world badly or being so heavenly minded to be of no earthly use. But resurrection teaches us that God does care about what happens here and now because he is not going to abandon it, but rescue, renew and transform it.

If I return to my hockey analogy, we are playing hockey now and in our resurrection we will be returning to the game, which means the better we get at hockey now the better equipped we will be then. But more than that the better we play now the more we are working towards the ultimate victory. Praying for God's kingdom to come, and his will to be done on earth are not idle prayers, they are a future.

So whatever we do in the Lord's name now, working for justice, showing mercy, being faithful at work and in your family, caring for a relative, using our God given talents, sharing the Gospel, whatever aspect of God's kingdom you may care to think of, it is never in vain it is not empty, in fact it is part of God's ongoing work of bringing his kingdom to this earth.

This is the surprising hope of the Christian, a profound hope that encourages us to be fully engaged in this world, in this life as we look forward to the new creation that will come. I hope that you share my excitement about this hope and that you will stand firm in this gospel of Jesus working hard for the Lord, knowing that nothing that we do for him is in vain, it is worth doing. And knowing that unless the Lord return first, we will rest in peace but we will be raised in glory, **HALLELUJAH.**

Richard Humphrey
Dean of Hobart