Hope is one of the great recurring themes in human existence and is also at the heart of Christian spirituality. Hope is one of the three great and enduring virtues listed by St Paul (1 Corinthians 13:13), although sometimes I’ve wondered if it’s been the ‘poor cousin’ to faith and love in Christian teaching?

Perhaps one reason for this is that hope can seem like a really wishy-washy attitude. It can seem a sort of vague desire for things to be better than they are, but without much expectation that anything is going to change and without much idea of how things might change. But that is to undersell hope which, for those who are followers of Jesus Christ, is a mode of being and acting.

Hope is a positive orientation to the future, and it leads us to act, to move beyond where we are, to a better future; to gradually but persistently grow to become all that we are called by God to be.

People experience the beginnings of hope when they recognise possibilities for something better, which in turn involves transformation. Australian theologian Anthony Kelly characterises hope in a number of ways: as a movement forward from defeat, danger or despair to something more positive; and as entry to a fuller dimension of life. (Kelly, 2006). One can hear resonances of Jesus here, “I have come that you may have life and have it to the full.” (John 10:10).

Having recognised the potential for positive change, a person begins to live in hope when he or she seeks out ways in which these possibilities might be realised. A common image for human experience is the journey of life. Using this image, we can say that hope entails an ability and a willingness to see a path towards a better future, a path that takes us beyond who and where we are today.

Ideally, an individual (or a community) living in hope will discover pathways that lead to positive changes which can be sustained over time, rather than set out on pathways that lead to dead ends.
Relationships with others are integral for this journey. By its very nature, hope calls people to collaboration rather than isolation, to partnership rather than competition. In the spiritual life, it reinforces the importance of community. Our communion with God is discovered and lived not as an individual, but as a member of the Church – that community of broken, vulnerable women and men seeking healing and transformation together in Christ.

This work of hope is aided by, and in turn builds upon, a number of foundational life stances. Some of these are:

- an openness to trust, even in the face of overwhelming ambiguity;
- belief in a kind and generous universe;
- expectation of change and a willingness to seek it (what we commonly call ‘motivation’); and
- grace, synchronicity and a capacity to see goodness and God’s providence in life and in the world.

Hope rests upon a number of foundational Christian beliefs. Primary among these is that we have a creative and creating God who invites human beings to be co-creators in history and in the world. Such creative activity is both personal and communal, and is directed towards writing a life-giving history for all humanity.

In the image of the Trinity, Christians recognise relationality as one of the key characteristics of God. As Father, Son and Holy Spirit, God models a community of love and action which beckons us to leave behind individualism and isolation, to move into a space more open to relationship and collaboration with others. Here the work of hope can be most effectively undertaken.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ from death affirms that God’s call is a call to transformation and new life. It is the event in which hope is put at the heart of human existence, for in it God’s commitment to human life in all its fullness is shown forth definitively in history. And so, the Church proclaims in the Easter season:

In Christ a new age has dawned, the long reign of sin is ended,  
a broken world has been renewed, and we are once again made whole.  
The joy of the resurrection renews the whole world,  
while the choirs of heaven sing for ever to your glory.  
(4th Preface of Easter)

In his foundational ‘mission statement’ in John 10:10, Jesus affirmed that God desires fullness of life for all human beings. This was the vision that shaped Jesus’ mission,

... to bring good news to the poor...  
to proclaim release to captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”  
(Luke 16:18-19)
This is the work of hope, calling individuals, institutions and cultures to transformation. It is a work that must rely on God’s grace for its fulfillment, yet it also requires our co-operation. To paraphrase the great Karl Rahner, it is hope that will allow us to respond to the ultimate mystery – God – who both beckons us on and nudges us forward, to transcend the limitations of time and place in order that we might grow to become all that God calls us to be.

That possibility fills me with hope!

Reference:


*This article is a revised and expanded version of a position paper Anthony prepared for Australian Catholic University’s Institute for Advancing Community Engagement.*

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