

# A People of Hope – Ian Cowley

*Hope offers the substance of all theology to the individual soul. By hope all the truths that are presented to the whole world in an abstract and impersonal way become for me a matter of personal and intimate conviction. What I believe by faith, what I understand by the habit of theology, I possess and make my own by hope. Hope is the gateway to contemplation, because contemplation is an experience of divine things and we cannot experience what we do not in some way possess. By hope we lay hands on the substance of what we believe and by hope we possess the substance of the promise of God's love.<sup>1</sup>*

This is a wonderful piece of writing by Thomas Merton on the subject of hope. Hope is a notoriously difficult concept to pin down. Hope in the Christian sense of the word is something far greater than wishful thinking. This is not about saying that we hope the weather will be better tomorrow or that we hope we can make our flight connection at the airport. Christian hope is 'the substance of all theology to the individual soul', says Merton. And also, says Merton, 'hope is the gateway to contemplation', and indeed to the Christian understanding of the contemplative life.

To followers of Christ, our hearts are rooted and grounded in a great and unchangeable hope. This is the hope which Paul expounds in the letter to the Romans, the hope by which we believe that 'neither height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.' (Romans 8:39) And so, in Romans 15:13 Paul prays, 'May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.'

Paul is saying here much the same as Thomas Merton. It is in believing, in 'what I believe by faith', as Merton says, that we may come to abound in hope. We then are filled with all joy and peace in our hearts by the God of hope. God is the source of our hope, not any earthly circumstances or events. In fact this hope is completely independent of earthly events and the situations in which we find ourselves. Our hope as Christians is bound entirely to the person of Jesus Christ and to his resurrection from the dead. As the first letter of Peter says, 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.' (1 Peter 1:3)

Hope is personal. Hope transforms my inner being and my sense of what my life is about. Hope is the gateway to contemplation, says Merton. The contemplation that Merton is talking about here is not mindfulness or meditation as it is widely taught these days. This is much more than a daily discipline of sitting silently and paying attention to our thoughts and our breathing. This type of mindfulness emphasises staying in the present moment for a short period of time as a way of releasing stress and anxiety. There is certainly much value in this practice, but Merton has something very different to this in mind.

Contemplation for Merton is so much more. Contemplation is, says Merton, 'an experience of divine things'. This is why hope is the gateway to contemplation, because, continuing on from the opening quote, 'by hope we possess the substance of the promise of God's love'. He goes on, in the next paragraph, to be specific about how we may know the promise of God's love: 'Jesus is the theology of the Father. If I do not hope in His love for me, I will never really know Christ.' Contemplation in the Christian tradition is centred on Christ. For Merton, what one believes by faith in Jesus, and then makes one's own by hope, is essential to contemplative practice as he understands it.

This is all highly significant for us now living in the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. We are living in wild and strange days. Our consciousness is daily buffeted by news of poverty and inequality, the climate emergency, racism, war and violence. We live in a digital world, in 'the age of acceleration', and none of us is in control of what is happening to our lives.<sup>2</sup> We all know that we are not capable of dealing with the challenges that are ranged against us. The weight of the world is heavy upon many shoulders and hearts, and for many, signs of hope are hard to find. As we think about the world that our children and grandchildren may be facing, we may well be filled with anxiety and even despair.

So a huge question for our time is this: Where do we find hope? To answer this for myself, I am increasingly drawn back to my own experience as a student in South Africa in the early 1970s when I was a member of an organisation called the University Christian Movement. When the UCM started in the late 1960s it was supported by all the mainline churches, as an ecumenical non-racial student organisation. UCM was a radical, fresh and exciting Christian movement which believed in a vision of a just and free South Africa. Within five years the UCM had been crushed by the apartheid government. Its leaders were either banned or driven into exile. I and many others who had joined the UCM were shaken to the core by what had happened. We knew then that we faced a ruthless and authoritarian government. In those days it was almost impossible to envisage that the kind of change for which we

longed and prayed would ever come to South Africa.

In these circumstances, it was all too easy to give up or to give in. Yet in South Africa I and many others were able to find hope through faith in Christ, and through our experience of the Christian communities and churches which remained, even in the darkest times, committed to the way of God's love in Christ for our society. Hope does not ultimately come from looking at a desperate situation and trying to plan a way forward. This may help, and be an important thing to do, but sometimes we face forces that are just too powerful and our situation may humanly speaking seem to be hopeless. At that time in South Africa I was privileged to know and work with those who showed me Christ by their faith and by their example. This is what made all the difference to me and to many others in those days of struggle. Through our hope in God we found strength to persevere, to work for justice, and to keep on believing that a new South Africa would one day be born.

Merton is right to say that hope is the gateway to contemplation. But I would also want to say that it is our practice of contemplative prayer that grounds us in hope. As the practice becomes established in our daily lives, we will find that increasingly we draw our hope from the still centre. This is the place where the love of God rules in our inmost being, where we simply *know* that his love is the final word in all our human experience. Here, in the place of daily letting go and self-emptying, we learn to abide and rest and trust in God, no matter what is going on around us. This is where our hope is nurtured and sustained. This is where we know, like Paul in Romans 8:39, that 'nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.'

### Notes

1. Thomas Merton, 'Sentences on Hope', in *No Man is an Island* (London: Burns & Oates, 2001), pp. 18-19.
2. 'The age of Acceleration' is a term coined by the American journalist Thomas Friedman to describe our times in which the world is in thrall to 3 powerful accelerating forces, those of technology, globalization and climate change.

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