

Hope during Covid-19

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 15 November, 2020

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Gareth Thomas-Burchell,
Gillian Hunt, Sheila Walkerden and Will Ray

Pentecost 24A

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

Gareth

What is it that sustains you?

What is it that keeps you going from day to day?

What is it that makes you try and continue trying?

Many would say that it is hope that keeps us going, even amidst seeming loss and failure, together with fulfilment of plans and ticking the boxes that we impose on ourselves.

“Living with hope” is our focus for the next couple of weeks as we approach the end of the liturgical year and embark on, once again, the Season of Advent when we wait with hopeful expectancy, the coming of God incarnate, Jesus the Christ.

So when we talk of hope, what are we hoping for? Is it success and fulfilment of plans? Or is it the attempt to try and give something a chance?

Is hope the expression of faith, of working for the unseen and unfulfilled?

Hold that thought for a little while, as we dip our toes into the scriptures for today, particularly the parable in the gospel of Matthew.

We live in a world that says success is good. Succeeding at anything from balanced budgets to propagating plants is good, from passing exams to baking a good loaf of bread is good.

When looking at the gospel reading, we are presented with a story about a generous person who offers three people different amounts of responsibility according to their ability.

The tangible expression of responsibility in the gospel story is talent, for even the one who is given only one talent is given a huge amount. Commentators say that a talent was the equivalent of 15 years of salary for a day labourer.

We are left with the question of what one is to do with such a huge amount? A perplexing question if one is to think only in monetary terms.

It has more to do with how we allow the life of God to flow through us - because it is powerful - like money!

The challenge is to live as those who are awake and sober, that is, to look for God's activity that leads to justice and compassion, and then join it.

Listen firstly, to two stories, one by Sheila Walkerden and then by Gillian Hunt about using what they have amidst life itself to give expression and substance of what hope is to them.

Gillian

Today and next Sunday we are hearing about hope from the perspective of younger and older people in our Pitt Street community.

Sheila Walkerden has given lots of thought to what is hope for her during COVID but she did not feel able to record and speak them herself at this time. So I offered to write something but then asked Sheila if she would be willing to share with me what she had already prepared and she has kindly agreed. I'm beginning with her wise words as well as adding some thoughts of my own. This is what Sheila sent me.

Sheila

Hope helps us harness discontent and unhappiness and turn it into something useful.

Hope is a great gift, and helps us be tenacious.

I have lived through other dark times, as have many people hearing this. I was born during the Great Depression of the 1930s, when my parents lost everything except life and tenacity. All their plans for the future were upended.

My childhood and early teenage years were during World War 2. I remember being so fearful, as a child, and the steadying voices of my mother and father who had known too well the catastrophe of the Great War, as they called it. It was grim then, and though there was hope, it was deeply buried. It found expression in helping other people. We worked for the War Effort, saving, sharing, making do, growing food, knitting for the armed forces, keeping in touch, grieving with dear ones who lost family in combat. The fear of invasion by the Japanese Army was sharp at one stage, and relatives from Queensland hurried to Sydney.

After the war ended, there was the fear of atomic war, until nations came up with that stalemate, M-A-D: Mutually Assured Destruction.

The pandemic is hard in different ways. To me it was having all outside activities cease, and being cut off from friends and family. No Pitt St community gatherings to recharge us week by week, although electronic contact was good, and helped. But someone of my age can be a bit overwhelmed with new tech methods of being together.

So where have I found hope this year?

In a deep sense of resilience.

Where has this resilience come from?

I think it is built into humans, existing as part of our spirit, and life itself. A deep sense of resilience, one foot after the other; that this Spirit we call God is still present with us, is still loving us, and somehow guiding our spirit. And for those of us who hold the story of Jesus precious, we have the assurance from him that God is Spirit, the spirit of life permeates our world, and all living creatures.

What have I been doing to fill the days now that I seldom see friends?

All the things that I can still do, and that I have been doing, though ever more slowly, over the last few years. The ordinary things first; reading, a bit of gardening, texting and phoning friends, a bit of adventurous cooking; quilting, just knee size or cot size.

One thing that has made this year a good new experience for me is that with a couple of friends I wrote and published a book. It is about local environmental work, to help those still working in the field, understand the history of the Lane Cove bushland sites, so that they can work more effectively. That began at the end of 2018, and was completed at the end of 2019, so this year has been publication, and whatever sort of publicity that has been possible during the pandemic. We only got round to a small book launch last month. That, like anything creative, has lifted my spirit this year.

So something creative, even as quiet and personal as knitting or quilting, has helped me keep grounded this year. Of course I have missed friends and family very much, and when lately, they have come to visit, there have been no hugs, just an occasional laughing elbow bump. That has been hard to get used to.

Jesus told his disciples, and the Pharisees, that the kingdom is within us. Hope leads to resilience. These small resources, what Richard Flanagan, the Australian writer, calls: *small acts of kindness of ordinary people*, point to a better future.

Julia Baird, the Sydney writer, talks about wonder and awe, and how these things of beauty in the natural world, sustain her when things go dark. She swims with a group most mornings, and was transfixed by the experience, as yet unexplained by scientists, of phosphorescence in the sea water. I have seen this only once, one evening with a friend in waters a bit north of Sydney. It was magical, almost too much, I had to turn away. Mostly for experiences of wonder and delight I look at a beautiful tree I can see from my favourite chair. It never fails to calm and soothe me, allowing for love and hope to return. It is all part of the wonderful beauty of this planet which is our home.

As for that other great sadness, hanging over us all, behind and beyond COVID, there I find it hardest of all to hang onto hope. Climate change.

When we live with conservative governments that are unwilling to recognise the obvious, is a frightening prospect. Hope, here too, lies in the many actions of ordinary people who are doing extraordinary things: planting trees, signing petitions, acting on the economic imperatives, and hoping, hoping, that we can stop catastrophic change. The news of new actions being taken continues to increase, and perhaps we will make it, and our children's children will live to enjoy this place we call home.

Hope is something built deep inside us by the spirit of life.

I see hope in everything, in all living things. Why do plants in a drought put all their last energy into a wonderful display of blossoming, so that there may be seeds for the future, for reproduction, for continuation? Perhaps it is a long shot to call this hope, but it is like an urge to keep going when things seem hopeless.

Gillian

I read what Sheila so beautifully wrote and then put it aside, wondering what else if anything, I could say. After a few scrapped beginnings I realised that Sheila and I shared many threads of connection, through our interests and our understandings. Here are my thoughts.

My family must have saltwater in our veins. Being near and in the sea was an integral part of our growing up and even when living in Canberra for many years, I still needed to seek out river or lake water. Two of my siblings have swum throughout this Covid year. Our younger sister rarely missing a morning to dive into the waters of Botany Bay and our brother into the ocean at Cronulla. They regard this practice as a happy addiction, a habit that sets them up for whatever the day may bring. It's also a lifelong pattern of our mother, who at 97, steps into the water whenever she can.

When I agreed to speak about hope at this point in my life, my first thoughts went to the people I have visited each Monday in a hospital mental health unit, until COVID-19 put an ongoing halt to volunteer chaplaincy there. Many patients were addicted to things, be it substances or a belief in their own lack of worth. Some conversations would begin with: *I tried to kill myself, I have nothing to live for, it's hopeless.*

At these moments it would seem like there was nothing to say beyond acknowledging that life must indeed have felt hopeless at that moment. After a while I might ask: *Being here, now, what do you miss?*

And I would hear about a person, a pet, a place. And sometimes that would lead the patient to sit a little taller and begin to lift their head, and talk of details. On a few occasions the conversation has ended with both of us chuckling about something the patient has remembered, even beginning to talk about what they hope to do when they are well enough to leave the hospital. As Sheila has said: *it is an urge to keep going when things seem hopeless.*

I've come to realise how addictive is hope itself. It is very difficult to give up all hope. Tragically for some, it can become too hard to keep holding on to even one hopeful thread. Yet hope stubbornly persists. Just when we may feel there is no more left it offers itself in familiar ways. The way the dawn sun lifts the night sky or sleep comes to refresh worn bodies and spirits or the phone rings and someone says: *hello I've really missed you.*

In this most challenging of years and when I'm missing overseas family the most, hope waits for me to notice that it's there. It is more than optimism, more than finding happy thoughts or developing a positive attitude, more than a naive trust in God to get us through, although I expect they all contribute to being hopeful.

This year I've come to see hope as a vital component of being human. Like Sheila has said, a primal gift of the Spirit deep within each one of us. The more I cultivate hope the more it sustains, encourages and lifts me.

As Sheila says, it is seeing hope in everything, in all living things.

Gareth

Hope is beyond optimism, it is the primeval human response to keep us going even when all seems lost. The last thread of hope is what sustains us.

A simple life experience of my own. I continue to embark on the mission impossible of converting a lifeless section of garden that was dusty, rocky, weedy and uninviting, into something that is full of life. To now it has just existed.

Over the last three years of living here, Karyn and I have tried on numerous occasions to give this part of the garden some life. Each time we have done something to improve it, we have done so in hope that it will respond.

Over the last few weeks, we have once again nourished it with TLC, and once again, we hope that it will spring to life. We hope once again in the faith that our efforts will show fruit.

Could this be a response to being given opportunity to use what we have got? Is this morsel of activity a sign of living in hope and responding to what God has given, even if it is only a dusty patch of lifeless earth, even if it is only one talent? Here is another story, this time from Will Ray who issues us a challenge.

Will

Hey Church!

Yesterday, on November 14th, 2020, I was supposed to get married. My sister was going to officiate, a beautiful wedding in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, along with our closest friends and family. Our colours were going to be burgundy and white – which there was a bit of a debate on that. We were to have live piano players. We had to save a bit extra for that. Beautiful flowers, just a gorgeous archway over the wedding stand. I wish I could have shown you the photo. And a videographer to capture the day. It was something that seemed a really good idea. We'd been listening to podcasts.

We coordinated with vendors, we planned all the flights to get there, we woke up at weird hours to talk to people on the other side of the world. We went to so much effort to plan a really wonderful wedding. And we had another one yet to put together in India! With a palace, hundreds of people as you can expect from an Indian wedding, days of celebration. Apparently I was going to be riding an elephant. Just so much joy in things to put together!

We had a lot planned when those COVID times started happening in February.

In mid-March, we get the message that everyone is going to be working from home.

All of a sudden, we have all these plans that get thrown into question! International flights are eventually closed and you hear some positive things at the beginning. We're still trying to plan something but we're just not quite sure any more it's actually going to happen.

The idea that our ability to sanctify this bond that we wanted forever was stymied by a pandemic we could neither predict nor control was infuriating. Nobody can tell you when it will be done, or better, or different. You have to un-plan all your plans, and then make all these phone calls to try to cancel flights – that's worse than trying to schedule flights in the first place.

It's infuriating! There was nothing we could do to fix it!

We got so tired of it that, instead, we said: *you know what? We always wanted to get registered in Australia, so let's spruce that up a little bit and turn it into something more.*

We ended up with maybe five people at the ceremony, our family all watching on a smartphone held by one of those five. We had random people who happened to be walking by who cheered for us. It was something that I would have never predicted. But it also reminded me that it's easy to get lost in things that aren't so important.

It's something I would have never guessed, had you told me years ago that I would be getting married on a beach on the other side of the world to the woman I love with my own family watching on a phone!

Martin Luther King, Jr. once said:

"We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope."

Hope is trusting that things are going to get better. It is not a promise of when those things will get better. It's not even a guarantee. But beauty can really be found when we let go of what we're trying to control and all those beautiful details – and instead, focus on what's possible for us to achieve. We are in times that are unprecedented – which means that we can do things that we never thought we could have done before – because we are being pushed to do that!

Had you told me when I was twenty, I just wouldn't have thought I'd get married like that. But there's something special about that, something very unique. And it's a reminder of what really is important in these times.

I challenge you to think intentionally, carefully, and confidently to pursue a mindset to think about what's possible. If you set aside, for a moment, things you can't control. The things that cause you duress. The stressful things that you wanted to do but you can't do that are a constant reminder. And instead, for a moment, think about what's possible? All of a sudden you start to see some new and incredible opportunities that might be sitting right in front of you! Not as a replacement, but as something brand new and different. Remain hopeful that a day will come where joy and energy will find you again. And you'll reach these things at a time of immense joy.

You know, we've set a date for our wedding next year, and it might not happen. But I hope it does.

Gareth

May the God of hope guide you and sustain you as you continue to be the expression of living hope.