

St Michael's Cornhill

THE CITY
NEW YEAR SERVICE

10 / 01 / 2025

www.st-michaels.org.uk

Transcript of sermon delivered by Revd. Dr. Michael Spence AC

Readings: Luke 24:1-12. 1 Peter 1:3-9

Hope for the City

It is wonderful to be here with you marking the beginning of a new year. Of course, this service marks an annual change in the calendar, but today also happens to be my birthday, so for me it is a new year in a very personal way as well. The celebration of a new year and a birthday have this in common, while both involve some retrospection, the overwhelming focus of our celebrations tends to be on the future; we 'welcome' the new year, wish one another a 'happy new year', and on a birthday we hope for 'many happy returns'. New year and birthday celebrations are full of resolutions for the year ahead, they are drenched with hope for better things.

So it seemed only natural to take 'hope' as my subject today and to consider just a short phrase from 1 Peter 1:3. This phrase comes as a part of two verses that are so theologically rich it would take a lifetime to unpack them. Even the phrase itself makes a claim so incredibly confronting to common sense both ancient and modern that we can barely begin to scratch the surface of its meaning. It is that God 'has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead', 'a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead'.

The philosophy of the phenomenology of hope has, in recent years, been fascinated by the question as to whether hope is a positive or a negative emotion. While hope is certainly often seen as positive, the very concept implies the possibility of its opposite, despair, a world of negative potentiality. I hope to succeed because I might fail; I hope to win because I might lose; on my birthday I hope for many happy returns because the sad reality is that sickness and death is always an imminent possibility. On the greeting card stand just beside the birthday cards are those expressing the hope that I might get well soon. Only the condolence cards are at all likely to resist the stubborn Hallmark

propensity to hope. There is just a hint of Beckett about birthdays the older you get; 'They give birth astride a grave, the light gleams an instant, and then it is night once more.'

So it seems to me that any account of hope must also offer an understanding of this hinterland of disappointment, suffering and death. Perhaps perversely in a new year's sermon on hope, I want to linger a while in that hinterland, because it is surely against that background that any account of hope must be measured.

The poet Philip Larkin captures how this hinterland of suffering and death is not only a matter of great tragedy, but also stands mundanely behind our everyday lives; in the poem *Ambulances* he describes how people going about their routine business, 'children strewn on steps or road, or women coming from the shops past smells of different dinners', see someone on a stretcher and 'sense the solving emptiness that lies just under all we do, and for a second get it whole, so permanent and blank and true. "Pour soul" they whisper at their own distress.'

One of the reasons that I find a Christian account of the world so compelling, is that it gives weight to my deeply held conviction that there is more to all this than just a 'solving emptiness, that lies just under all we do'. A Christian account of the world gives weight to my strong intuition that suffering and death are somehow 'wrong', not just as a matter of my felt preference, but in a way that offends the deepest ordering of reality, and represents a brokenness in the way that things were somehow intended to be. In the Christian story, God in the person of Jesus snorts in indignation at human suffering and weeps in outrage at the tomb of his dead friend. The feeling 'this is profoundly not right, not as things are supposed to be', is a feeling many of us have when those we love become sick or die, no matter how old they might be. In that context, the context of a broken world, it makes sense to hope that the world will be put right, that there will be, in the language of 1 Peter we heard read, some sort of 'salvation', that there is something 'incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away' for which it is legitimate to hope.

This sense that it is meaningful to speak of the world as 'broken', and meaningful to 'hope' that it will be put right, seems natural to many of us, but that is because the Christian story has been so important to the development of our culture. For the committed materialist, for whom reality is the product of an endless chain of physical causation, neither suffering nor hope can ultimately have any meaning and the way things are is the way things are. For some that view has a certain appeal in a world 'red in tooth and claw', but it is thankfully not a view by which they tend to live as a matter of practice. In some religious world views, suffering is the will of a god or gods, in others darkness is the complement of light in a cyclical dance that has a certain beauty seen from afar, but becomes harder to accept in the eyes of a suffering child. For these traditions, too, it is difficult to give a compelling account of the concept of hope. For the Christian, by contrast, suffering and death are somehow wrong and it is right, it is a human duty, to hope that they will be one day defeated for good.

Interestingly, it turns out that, in the midst of suffering, there is real practical value in hope, and in believing that your hope is grounded. Repeated studies of the role of hope in palliative care show that it makes a real difference, even in management of the direst health conditions, if patients, their carers, and supporters have hope. More generally, the academic psychologist Jamil Zaki, who runs the Stanford Social Neuroscience Lab and has written a popular book with the marvellous title *Hope for Cynics*, argues that hope and its companion trust, rather than cynicism and scepticism, have all sorts of benefits, not only for individuals, but also for whole communities. Hope, it seems, is good for us as we navigate a broken world, and certainly better than the grim despair dressed up as 'realism' that comes so naturally to many. Oddly, Zaki regards it as 'firmly established and widely accepted within the scientific community' that 'people have a natural inclination to focus on the negative', even though doing so is neither in their best interests nor the best interests of the communities of which they are a part.

Taking a step back, it seems to me that these two realities – that we live in a broken world, and that hope is good for us – present us with a real conundrum. It would be a particularly cruel irony if hope turned out to be good for us, and also entirely ungrounded. It would be particularly cruel if hope were important, but no more than wishful thinking. I once had a couple of respiratory arrests during a medical procedure. The physician looked calm and hopeful and told me that it would all be alright, but he didn't know that I also saw the panic in his face as he turned away from me. A deluded hope might be useful for a while, but only a hope in something that can meet the challenge of suffering and death head on is ultimately of any use.

Challengingly, this is where the extraordinary claim of 1 Peter 1:3 rings out, 'begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead'. Christians believe that the brokenness of the world arises from a deep break in relationship between human beings and God, the ultimate source of all life, that it is a brokenness, a death, from which we all suffer, but to which we all contribute, and in exacerbating which we must acknowledge our part. Our contempt for the irritating colleague that fuels office rivalries, is of a piece with the hatred that leads to war; the greed of which we are all capable is the greed that leaves millions starving; our insatiable appetite for ease and comfort is slowly choking the planet on which we depend. Christians believe that in the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, God himself somehow took into himself all the pain, and anger, and sickness, and brokenness, and death of the world, and that in his resurrection from the dead he began a revolution that begins in the lives of individuals, and communities, and will one day lead to the remaking of the whole world. Christians believe that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, for which there is strong historical and philosophical argument, is the only sure ground of hope in the face of suffering and death, the only sure ground to believe in the healing, the remaking, of all things. It is the place at which restoration of the relationship between God and the world is achieved. The remaking of all things is, of course, as difficult to imagine as it would have been to conceive of this

world before its foundation, but it is the Christian hope for ‘an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not pass away’.

These claims really do confront common sense, both ancient and modern. And the evidence that that revolution has begun can sometimes seem quite shaky. But for people in still growing numbers around the world, numbers growing at a rate faster than the rate of population growth, and for the last two thousand years, they have provided a firm ground for hope in even the darkest of times and contexts. The question that confronts each one of us, therefore, is simply whether they are true. As someone once put it (I can’t quite remember who), ‘Is this dream of the resurrection true, or is reality so bleak that we must fill it with a dream?’

Well that is a question with which I leave you for 2025. All I can do, as Peter points out later in his letter, is to give an account of the hope that I have found in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to challenge you, this new year, to examine that claim as a basis for hope, and to ask, if not there, where else is hope to be found? When the claims of the resurrection seem most incredible to me, I am reminded of an incident involving this same Peter. Jesus asks his disciples if they want to give up following him. And “Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” It is my prayer that we hear, and respond to, those words in 2025. “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has begotten us again to a living hope from the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.’

We pride ourselves at St Michael’s on giving people the space to consider the Christian faith afresh. Click [here](#) if you would like to hear more about a guided read-through of one of the eye-witness accounts of the life of Jesus.