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Hope (Luke 6. 17-26)

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'I knew from the outset that I would be imprisoned for life—either for the rest of my life or until the end of the life of this regime ... [T]he most foolish thing I could do is pay attention to people who say, "[Alexei], sure, the regime is going to last at least another year, but the year after that, two at most, it will fall apart and you will be a free man." ... People write that to me frequently ... The truth of the matter is that we underestimate just how resilient autocracies are in the modern world'. These words come from the prison diary of Alexei Navalny, leader of the Russian opposition, who died in an Arctic prison at the hands of the Kremlin exactly one year ago – on 16 February 2024.

Navalny continued: 'My approach to the situation is certainly not one of contemplative passivity. I am trying to do everything I can from here to put an end to authoritarianism'. Nevertheless, he said, 'giving in to wishful thinking (about when the regime will collapse and I will be released) would be the worst thing I could do. What if I'm not free in a year? Or three years? Would I lapse into depression? Blame everyone else for not trying hard enough to get me released? ... Relying on being released anytime soon, waiting for it to happen, is only a way of tormenting myself'.

In the past two months, a friend, Cathy, who is one of our South African Benedictus members, has been diagnosed with cancer. The disease is progressing frighteningly quickly. She, like Navalny, wants to face the reality of her situation and to ready herself as best she can for her death. She is greatly hurt when some around her will not let her speak this truth; whose response is to urge her not to give up hope: 'Come now, you're going to be fine ... the treatment will work, you'll recover soon'. Just as in Tolstoy's great short story, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, Ivan is tormented by his family and colleagues who insist on pretending he's not really dying.

At Benedictus, we're exploring the three virtues proclaimed as key to Christian life – faith, hope and love. Today our theme is 'hope' and, in many respects, it's the most complex. From a certain perspective, Alexei Navalny and Cathy seem to have given up hope. Hope of release, hope of a cure. Yet it's also clear they're facing reality, being true. Does this mean there comes a point where hope must die or be let go? A point where to continue hoping is no longer a virtue? Or is there something about hope, from a theological perspective, that remains necessary and good? At a time where much seems to threaten despair – ecologically, politically, socially as well as personally – the question of the nature of the virtue of hope has become urgent.

So what is hope? Cynthia Bourgeault notes that in our normal way of speaking, hope is tied to outcome. 'We would normally think of it as an optimistic feeling', she writes, 'or at least a willingness to go on – because we sense that things will get better in the future'.¹ Navalny was conscious that just this kind of hope tied to outcome persisted deep within him, even as he sought to face its likely disappointment: 'You have accepted the worst-case scenario, but there is an inner voice you can't stifle: Come off it, the worst is never going to happen. Even as you tell yourself your direst fate is unavoidable, you're hoping against hope that someone will change your mind for you'. I suspect this is true for many of us. Surely climate catastrophe can still be averted, surely the worst won't befall?

But where does this kind of hope leave you when the worst does happen? When death is upon you? When the forests burn? When we find ourselves, as many around the world now do, amidst the ruins of their former lives without power to change their situation? What hope is possible then? One strategy that can emerge at this point is to displace our hope of a good outcome into the next world. That's how the promise of life after death has often been heard. In this life, sure, hope for justice, healing and a better future may be disappointed, but in the next life, those who have been good and faithful servants will receive their reward. That's one way of hearing

¹ Cynthia Bourgeault, *Mystical Hope: Trusting in the Mercy of God* (Lanham, MY: Cowley Publications, 2001), p.3.

Jesus' words in the passage we just read. 'Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people hate you and revile you ... for surely your reward is great in heaven'. But the problem with this strategy, it seems to me, is that it leaves the structure of hope essentially unchanged. I'm still hoping for an outcome, it's just I've changed the timeline and the geography. So what's wrong with that?

Well, it seems falsifying. And it doesn't transform anything. Rowan Williams said one of the weightiest criticisms of Christian discourse is that, by speaking too glibly of eternal life, it risks being unserious about death, and evading or trivialising the abiding reality of unhealed, meaningless suffering.² It seems that this kind of hope, no matter how sincere and well-meant, can set us apart from the truth of what is; it can be deployed to protect us from suffering what is. We hope for things to be different, for problems to be solved, for pain to be eased or compensated in some afterlife and in the process we distance ourselves from what's actually happening here and now; in the last resort, we may even deny or refuse to accept the truth in front of us. If this is the underlying structure of hope then, like the Buddhists, we would be rightly suspicious of it.

But the theological virtue of hope is different. It has a different structure. And significantly, rather than distancing us from the pain of reality, this virtue of hope arises from the within of suffering. In the gospels, this is the quality of hope born in the disciples at the resurrection. And just as receiving the gift of resurrection life required Jesus truly to undergo dying, so the gift of authentic hope required the disciples to undergo the death of their outcome based hopes for power and influence in some new age. It required them to accept they could not fix their situation or restore meaning to their lives out of their own resources. Think of Mary Magdalene returning again and again to Jesus' tomb, facing the death of all her hopes and any sense of future or meaning.³ Yet it was precisely in that place that she found herself

² Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), p.40.

³ Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel*, revised ed. (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2002), p.40.

suddenly met – against all expectation – by a presence, an awareness that empowered her to live again from a qualitatively different energy and assurance.

In my experience too, this qualitatively different experience of hope has sometimes unexpectedly erupted when I've been deeply present to the pain of what I cannot change, in myself, in my circumstances, in our world. Returning again and again, naked and undefended, to the place of longing, emptiness and need, there has dawned some inexplicable confidence that 'all will be well', the peace that passes all understanding. And I think this what Jesus means by saying, 'blessed are the poor'. Not because poverty is good in itself or earns us a reward in heaven, but because the poor are those without resource. They are stripped of everything but their need, simply receptive to gift. True hope, the grace of hope, erupts when the hope of outcome is gone; it comes from elsewhere.

But does it always come? What about those who, lost in despair and seeing no future, take their own lives? Or those who, despairing of the possibility of goodness or change, fall into cynicism and bitterness or the frozen wastes of depression? I've said that theological hope arises where natural hope has been defeated or relinquished; that it's hope on the other side of despair. But what happens when it doesn't arise? When the gift is not given?

These questions touch deeply painful places – griefs that have affected many of you I know. Simone Weil said that affliction can strike people such a blow that they're left writhing on the ground like a worm. When affliction like this befalls it may be that the only glimmer of choice a person has is whether to keep facing in God's direction. There can be no question of judgement or blame if someone is unable to do this; if their anguish is more than they can bear. And yet this is, I think, where we see the connection between faith and hope. For if we have glimpsed even something of the goodness of God, if we have opened ourselves to God's Spirit at work within us, then (like Mary Magdalene) we may find ourselves refusing, even in the most terrible of circumstances, 'to accept that lostness is the final human truth'.⁴ Williams

⁴ Williams, *Resurrection*, p.40.

writes: 'the Spirit is that which more and more conforms to Christ; and so the Spirit is that which impels us forward, which creates hope out of our cries of protest in the present. We protest because we have tasted the reality of new life, God's life ... So that we know that our present pain is not the whole of reality, that behind it is a more final fact, God's vulnerable love drawing us forward'.⁵ And this is the gift of hope; hope that, as James Alison puts it, 'empowers us to bear the crushing violence of the world precisely because it keeps the mind fixed on God'⁶ as the real source and end of our life.

And this brings us at last to the necessity of hope. I've said that our usual way of hoping starts in the present and wishes for a different future. But theological hope is sourced in the future made visible in Christ, which is becoming real within us and among us here and now. Authentic hope thus implicates and transforms us; it involves active faith in its promise, attention and obedience to the stirrings of the Spirit in our lives.

This breakthrough to authentic hope does not guarantee a changed outcome. Alexei Navalny died in prison; Cathy will die soon. But it connects us in and through death to a larger and more encompassing life and love. Thus Alison writes movingly of the difference between 'hope' as 'hope of rescue' and 'hope' as the 'patient forging of a counter-story in the midst of the world's violence and death'.⁷ This is the hope that arrives as gift and that gives us energy, courage and daring to live from goodness and truth until the very end – the end of the regime, the end of our lives. As we face the overwhelming distress of our age, may we discover for ourselves this virtue of hope which joins us to that future where God is all in all.

⁵ Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to Saint John of the Cross*, second ed. (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1991), pp.21-22.

⁶ James Alison, *Raising Abel: The Recovery of the Eschatological Imagination* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1996), p.165.

⁷ Alison, *Raising Abel*, p.165.