

Sunday 9th March – Hope that does not disappoint us

Romans 5:1-8

Luke 4:1-13

What are your hopes?

Long life; good health; comfort; being in control of our own destinies?

Maybe when we were younger we hoped for a life partner; children; a steady job; freedom from money worries.

Perhaps as our children were born (if we have any) our hopes were focussed on them – education; happiness; career – whatever it might be.

Maybe our hopes are for society as a whole, for our community, for the world maybe.

Or perhaps some of our hopes are perhaps more trivial – hopes that our team would win the league (or at least not be relegated); hopes that we would have good weather on a particular day or holiday; hopes that we wouldn't get stuck in traffic or that the train would be on time; or even hopes that the scrambled egg pan might not be too difficult to clean.

And as we look back over our lives we can see that some of our hopes were realised and some were not.

Because the trouble with all of these things is that they are things we would like to happen, but we can never be sure they will. In one sense we can think of them as desires rather than hopes.

Throughout Lent we are using the booklets "Living Hope" for daily readings and for our weekly Lent Conversations. And this living hope, we might call our Christian hope, is something quite different. This Christian hope is certain. As Paul puts it in those verses from his letter to the Romans "*hope does not disappoint us*". It's a certain knowing rather than a wishful thinking and this certainty is based on the fact that the Christian hope is rooted in God rather than human things. It's a hope based on the firm promises that God gives us. And as such it cannot fail.

So what is this Christian hope?

The Christian hope is both for now as well as for the future. It's a hope for this earthly life and eternity.

For this earthly life, with all its trials and tribulations; with all its troubles and temptations. It's a hope that recognises God's presence alongside us in all that we do.

This hope does not mean it will be easy. It does not mean we won't face trouble. It does not mean we won't face temptation or low points. It does not mean bad things won't happen. And it does not mean we won't mess things up. But it does mean that whatever life throws at us God will be there alongside us. We will never be alone.

Lets look at the story of Jesus in the wilderness, our gospel for today the first Sunday of Lent.

Jesus is in the desert; we are told he hasn't eaten for 40 days. He is hungry – the word used is famished. No doubt he hoped for food to eat to satisfy his hunger.

He was about to embark on his ministry, to begin his mission. Perhaps he knew it would be hard. People wouldn't listen to him; he would be rejected. But I suspect too he hoped it would be successful, perhaps even easier than he feared.

He was perhaps afraid of what he thought might happen – the suffering and the pain. But I am sure he hoped he could be spared it; that there was some way it could be avoided.

His temptations addressed these concerns. He was in effect tempted to take the easy way out; to look for the human solutions. Turning the stones into bread; doing the devil's work in getting people to follow him; staging a miraculous display to make people listen. And yet he stayed firm. He recognised that the sure grounds for hope were not in the simple answers (that would not really be answers at all) but in God alone.

So as he faced each temptation he used the word of God, the promises of God to express this hope in God.

This story of Jesus is then a model for us as we seek to place our hope in God; to hope in his promises, in his word. There may be other apparent solutions which

seem easier, but they are false friends. The only certain hope is in God and in God's promises.

But the Christian hope is also for eternity.

It is a hope that says that even though we will physically die, our true life will go on. This life is not all there is. Our eternal hope is, as again Paul puts it in these verses, "*our sharing the glory of God*". And perhaps as we grow older this eternal perspective becomes much more important for us.

But what will that life be like? We cannot be absolutely certain, but I think we can know some things. In the Apostles creed we talk of the "resurrection of the body"; in the Nicene creed we use the phrase "the resurrection of the dead". In both cases the word resurrection is used; the same word we use for Jesus as he rose from the dead after the crucifixion.

When we think of the resurrection of Jesus, we know it was physical, yet more than physical. He could eat, yet pass through doors. His body had elements of his earthly body, yet people didn't always recognise him. The key to the understanding of this is that he was more than physical, not less so. His resurrection body belonged to a greater reality than we currently inhabit. And this is the future for us. Resurrection bodies in God's greater reality.

This will not be a disembodied spiritual existence. This will be real, solid life yet more so. It will be life in God's dimension - sharing the glory of God as Paul describes it. This is the sure and certain Christian hope. The words of the committal prayer in the funeral service may help us here:

*in sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life
through our Lord Jesus Christ,
who will transform our frail bodies
that they may be conformed to his glorious body,*

And one more thought about hope.

Today – as we shall be thinking in a moment – is a national day of reflection to mark 5 years since the Covid pandemic. Those days – and especially the days in lockdown – were difficult times for many and tragic times for some.

As churches we did all we could to care for people through those hard weeks and months. Phone calls to make sure people were OK, printing out sermons and other

information and delivering them around the parish; creating an online presence and an on the phone presence; taking gifts round for Christmas and Mothering Sunday. Even the virtual bingo and summer fair!

But it wasn't just churches. During the lockdown I chaired Shirley Mutual Aid. A group of ordinary Shirley people from a wide range of backgrounds who wanted to help others, wanted to make sure their neighbours were OK – particularly the old and vulnerable. Shopping was done; gardening done; books and jigsaws were shared. Phone calls were made and friendships developed. And we vowed that this sort of community care would continue; that when restrictions eased the new normal would be different from the old. The post pandemic society would be more caring and more supportive and more generous.

But despite those desires, the community has – on the whole - gone back to something many might say is worse than before. At least it looks like that on the surface. Locally and nationally.

However, there are pockets where hope has changed things – take our Welcome Café on a Tuesday morning for example and the ongoing support we as churches offer our members. And not just us – there are countless other cafes and lunch clubs and drop ins run by churches and other faith groups across the country. This is the result of hope into practice – real Christian hope. Hope in the promises of God to be alongside each of us and working through each of us. Hope that has not disappointed us.

I was at a conference on Friday at which the CEO of the Childrens Society shared a quote – The world is only ever changed by hope filled people. And so I pray - May we be those who are filled with Christian hope.

And so let us take a few moments to reflect on the pandemic; on the suffering; on the things that have changed and on those that should have changed.