

House of Hope

Joel 2:23-33; Luke 18:9-14

*"Hope" is the thing with feathers –
That perches in the soul –
And sings the tune without the words –
And never stops – at all –*

*And sweetest – in the Gale – is heard –
And sore must be the storm –
That could abash the little Bird
That kept so many warm.*

*I've heard it in the chillest land –
And on the strangest Sea –
Yet – never – in Extremity,
It asked a crumb – of me.ⁱ*

This lovely little poem by the American poet Emily Dickinson, for me at least, captures something of the fragility and persistence of that quintessential Christian trait: hope. In the gale, in the storm, in the chilliest land and on the strangest sea, hope, like a tiny bird perches in the distraught soul, singing the wordless song of hope, singing without ceasing.

That is surely what hope is. Fragile, hardly seeming strong enough to overcome the troubles of the world, the fears of life, but never, ever giving up. Fragile but resilient. Counter-intuitive, counter-cultural, but relentless in its faithfulness. The hope of faith is found in the steadfast love of God. Hope tells us, again and again, that God does not give up, God does not let go.

The prophet Joel writes, maybe in the C7thBC, to a people who'd undergone terrible suffering because a plague of locusts had decimated crops in the countryside. Locusts have aptly been named the "incarnation of hunger". To this day swarms of locusts darken the skies, heralding blight to large parts of the world. A land of plenty is all too swiftly turned into a wilderness. Hunger, malnutrition and death often follow. Locusts, like a dark army, invaded, destroy, and terrify people, leaving destruction in their wake.ⁱⁱ

It is a perfect image for the darkness and despair that can grip a nation, a world at difficult times. The people of Mosul and Aleppo, held to ransom by the so-called ISIS; the palpable fear in the United States if the unspeakable should happen and Donald Trump *is* elected as the next

president; the minute silence on Friday morning at 9.15am as our nation remembered the numbing blackness of the Aberfan disaster 50 years ago, where 144 people, 116 of them children, were killed when a mountain of coal waste swept through the village. Yet still, the fluttering, fragile, persistent little bird of hope tap, tap, tapping at the soul of despair until it chips, and cracks, and the song of light that is hope creeps in. No matter how dark the present moment, no matter justified the fear, God's final word to the world is not unendurable judgment; God's final word is found in redemption, God's final word is hope.

In the place of wasteland, there is a new creation, a new world; in the place of endless night, dawn breaks. Redemption. Salvation. Hope.

Into the parched spirituality of breaking and broken people, where many doubted God, or even denied God, God's Spirit is poured out on young and old, men and women. Visions of new possibilities. Dreams of new realities. Perching *in* them.

Time and again the Bible speaks to communities and nations who find themselves in the depths, who feel there is nothing left, nowhere to go, nothing to be done, until God's Spirit breathes the word, 'Hope'.

Is that a long-ago-and-far-away thing? Or might it be speaking today? I wonder, just wonder, if there is something of that in the refugee camp that is called 'The Jungle'? I know there are all the fears about terrorists being let in, of media-fed nightmares of hordes of strange-tongued immigrants flooding the land, you know, the ones who we forget work in our NHS, staff our care-homes, build our houses, fix our plumbing, drive our buses, serve us in restaurants, harvest our crops, find themselves enslaved in human-trafficking. But, if I dare, put those adult children of God aside, what about those unaccompanied children in The Jungle Camp in Calais. The ones who someone wanted their teeth checked to see what age they were, as if they were dubious livestock (a plan hopefully now dropped). What might the Spirit of the Book of Joel, the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Hope be whispering to them?

One of the things that the Bible does, unerringly, is make its theories, its ideas, its challenges jump out off the pages and make us realise – this is not a text book with a lot of philosophies to

think about, or mental exercises to go through. This is a living book whose words have practical implications for the way we live, the way we make our decisions, the way we run our country, the way we set our priorities, the way we want the world to go. It's why it's carried into church each Sunday with reverence. It's why it sits under my sermon notes, its x-ray vision searching out the words I've written to see if they are of God. It's why it sits, apparently undisturbed, in the book-shelves of the pews where you sit, daring you to open its pages and saying, "Read me, think about me, apply me."

Dreaming dreams and seeing visions, not just the preserve of the affluent West; but also of the young Afghan boy in Calais, looking strained, rubbing his hands together nervously on a chilly morning, whose father had sold his land to send his boy to a land where there might be, just might be, hope. That young boy, face breaking out into a broad grin, because his dream of a new life might be, just might be, within reach. Is that the Spirit of the Book of Joel, the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Hope whispering today? The thing with feathers, perching on the soul.

There are lots of people living in the dark, darkly. Crippled by debt, or illness; fearful of the restrictions age and frailty impose; wondering if they'll ever get work again, or ever save enough to retire comfortably; guilty of some big crime, or some small one; weighed down by some big sin, or some small one, and unable to hear the tap, tap, tap of the thing with feathers, perching in their soul. Hope.

Jesus told a tiny little story, a parable of reassurance, to the fearful and the hopeless; the marginalised and the excluded people. Two men go up to the Temple, and address their prayers to God. It's easy to dismiss the Pharisee as self-righteous. He says, "I" five times in two short sentences. The things he is doing in the name of his faith: being just, being faithful, not extorting money from others, fasting and giving 10% of his income to the Temple and the poor – that's all good. What is not good is his judgement of the tax collector (a judgement that would have been made by all Jesus' original hearers – tax collectors were the lowest of the low.) The Pharisee's error is his self-regard to the exclusion of the tax collector – a fellow human being; and therefore the effective exclusion of God. If we exclude people we are in danger of excluding

ourselves from God. The Pharisee doesn't appear to need God, and if you don't need God, are you also saying that you don't need God's mercy, God's love, God's blessing, and God's hope? The tax collector, standing in the shadows, not even able to look up, knows what he needs. "God, be merciful to me a sinner!" He knows he needs God's mercy, God's love, God's blessing, and God's hope. And in this story, that thing with feathers, that Spirit of Hope, whispers to the tax collector, and rests on him. For the outcast, for the sinner, for the broken one, hope comes.

Hope. Fragile. Fluttering. Feathered. Perching. Singing. Never giving up. For our world. For our country. For our community. For you. For me.

*"Hope" is the thing with feathers –
That perches in the soul –
And sings the tune without the words –
And never stops – at all –*

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

ⁱ Emily Dickinson, The Complete Poems, p116

ⁱⁱ Bryan Spinks, Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol 4, p194