

The audacity of hope

Psalm 8; Romans 5:1-5

'The Audacity of Hope' is a book written by former President Barack Obama where he discusses the importance of empathy and inclusiveness in politics, his hopes for a different America with different policies, and how the ideals of its democracy can be renewed. It conveys a rare frankness and humility in a politician, something one feels might be of some use in the political world on this side of the Atlantic at the moment. In our lowdown, dispiriting era, Obama proposes humane, sensible solutions to many of the world's issues which are persuasive and filled with common sense and compassion. They inspire the reader to hope.

Obama talks about some of the people he met in his travels:

"It wasn't just the struggles of these men and women that had moved me. Rather it was their determination, their self-reliance, a relentless optimism in the face of hardship. It brought to mind a phrase that my pastor...had once used in a sermon. The audacity of hope...the audacity to believe despite all the evidence to the contrary that we could restore a sense of community to a nation torn by conflict; the gall to believe that despite personal setbacks, the loss of a job or an illness in the family or a childhood mired in poverty, we had some control – and therefore responsibility – over our own fate...that pervasive spirit of hope..."ⁱ

John Cleese, the British comedian, said in the film *Clockwise*: 'It's not despair I mind; it is hope I can't stand.' Hope challenges our fatalism, which is why it is so unsettling.ⁱⁱ I think it's made even more unsettling by the fact that the possibility hope, and indeed the necessity for hope, is nearly always seen through the prism of trouble, or grief, or pain.

You may have heard something like the following: "Don't waste the pain!" in the midst of a difficult personal situation. The latter seems to suggest that good will come out of pain or suffering in life if we do not waste the opportunity it gives to us.

The idea that Paul writes about in his Letter to the Romans that, rightly used, pain and suffering can teach us lessons and help us grow in life, well, that's something worth thinking about.

Of course, we'd rather not suffer; we'd rather not have to go through pain, but when that can't be avoided; when it finds us out anyway, and our loved ones, what are we to do? How are we to respond?

We should have little time for the polite wringing of hands at the misfortunes, or the agonies of others. It says nothing of our faith, or our humanity, if watching the rape of Ukraine by illegal Russian aggression if we not only say nothing but worse, do nothing. It says nothing of our faith, or our humanity, if we hear of foodbanks being opened in hospitals not only for patients and their visitors, but for poorly paid staff; or hear of poorly paid carers who will struggle to do their jobs because they can't afford petrol for their cars; or families the length of our land making hard choices about heating or eating in the ongoing energy price rises if we not only fail to challenge our politicians verbally, but also do what we can when we can to offer even the little help that we can when we are able.

When the social and economic and moral compass of our time is pointing to growing suffering and injustice for more people, we are impelled by what we believe about fairness and compassion, and by the One in Whom we believe, Who worked through suffering and pain to bring healing and hope to try to do the same.

If nothing else, don't waste the pain! It is the pain that will often inspire us, through anger and dismay, towards action that will at the very least show solidarity, and at the very best bring a hope that is tangible and real. "We 'waste' suffering if we gloss over, deny, avoid or neglect its message...if, however, we can learn from pain it is not wasted but a *source of life and health*."ⁱⁱⁱ

The reading from Romans, written towards the end of Paul's life and ministry, has been viewed by some commentators as a summary of what he had learned of faith, hope and love through his own suffering. His 'formula' for hope describes what he learned from his pain, and his suffering. This is no glib slogan. Paul through years of being abused, beaten, imprisoned, and ridiculed, had stood in the place where he could say, with utter authenticity, "...suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint..." Paul had suffered, but he continued to hope.

Mother Teresa, serving with sister nuns in India, helped manage homes for people dying of HIV / AIDS, leprosy and tuberculosis. She helped run soup kitchens, dispensaries, mobile clinics, children's and family counselling programmes, and orphanages and schools in some of the most impoverished and desperate communities. She was often discouraged by what she had to confront, but she never gave up hope.

Hope happens because we take our faith and we do something with it. Maybe a very small thing. Maybe a huge thing. But for a whole community, or just one single person, our standing with them, our giving something of ourselves to them, openly or anonymously, helps them go on. Hope happens, even in suffering, because we are moved, and others are moved, to stand alongside, and offer help. Our faith (endurance and character) and God's love, freely given, are the physical, tangible substance of hope.

If that sounds familiar, it is. Paul wrote to another Church, "So, faith, hope, love abide; but the greatest of these is love." These are words for life. In our faithfulness we find God's faithfulness. In our hopefulness we find God's hopefulness. In our loving-kindness we find God's loving-kindness.

One more thing I feel I ought to say. Paul does not provide us with a general rule about inevitability. Paul does not say that whenever the world breaks us, we will inevitably heal back stronger. Some who suffer, suffer for good, and they do not get well again. There is no magic in Paul's words, nor is there simple-minded optimism. Paul promises that our suffering need not be wasted. Because we belong to God in Jesus, the love of the cross will help us to endure, and help us, still, to work towards a hope that may not always reverse the suffering, or obliterate the evil, but will enable us, and others, to learn, to move on, to help others, to help ourselves.

Hope helps us to carry the scars, and not hide them.

In 2019, at a National Holocaust Memorial Service, I met a tiny little Polish lady in her 80s, Mala Tribich. At the age of 12 she became a work slave at Ravensbruck in 1944 before she was transported in a cattle truck to Bergen-Belsen.

She met with unexpected kindnesses along the way, as well as unspeakable cruelty. At one point, in Belsen, shoes removed again, clothes removed again, shaved, and in the striped concentration

camp clothing, she felt she no longer recognised herself, let alone the people around her. With her identity gone, her story no longer made sense to her. Who was she, what had happened to her family (all but her brother were wiped out in the holocaust)? She knew that to lose hope would be to lose survival. She survived, barely alive, and was liberated from Belsen by British troops.

I watched Mala as she lit a candle. Her face, initially hard because it had been hard to tell the story again, softened, and she wept quietly. She said, "I have to keep telling the story, so long as I live. So that I can try to make sense of what happened; so that others can try to make sense of what happened." I said to her, "I don't know if we can ever make sense of what happened, I know I can't. I don't ever want to be able to explain it, I simply think we need to keep remembering it, and calling it out when other evils in the world arise."

She looked at me for a moment and I wondered if I had said the wrong thing. She said to me, "You may be right. After all these years I still work to make it make sense. I say the prayers; I think I believe. The prayers don't take it away. They don't make what happened make sense. But I have to keep saying them, because they help me make sense of what happens after. They give a hope I can't explain. Without hope there's no survival. And I have survived."

We all have our stories of challenge and despair. When we need it most of all, I pray we will also have the audacity of hope, which helps us to hold on, scarred maybe, and survive.

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

Amen

ⁱ Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*, p356

ⁱⁱ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, p23

ⁱⁱⁱ Peter Steinke, *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach*, p52