

2. Living With Hope

The Foundations of Hope in Life and Death

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There is a well-known story of a traveller in the middle ages who arrived at a village and met three labourers working in a quarry. He spoke with them about their daily work. 'What are you doing?', he asked. 'I'm breaking rocks', the first workman replied. The second man responded, 'I'm earning for my family'. But the third labourer stood tall and, with a glint in his eye, responded, 'I'm building a cathedral.'

The way we live now is greatly influenced by what we believe about the future. This is because our hopes and fears for the future substantially shape the present. They impact our attitudes, our motivations and our commitments. Our expectations of the future determine

not only our present emotional well-being, but also shape our present decisions and actions.

Hope is not simply about the future. Hope is life itself.

Hope in the pandemic

The coronavirus pandemic has inevitably raised in our minds many uncertainties about the future. We face these as communities and societies, but they also impact us at the personal level. At the time of writing, these relate to questions about the destiny of the virus, and whether the pandemic will come in successive waves; or how it will impact the poorer and less developed nations of the world, the four million refugees in Turkey, and the vulnerable masses in slums and favellas; or how the pandemic will finally be brought under control. And further, we wonder what economic impact this will have in the years to come, with its global implications as well as personal concerns about our employment and economic well-being. Many commentators express their concerns about the longer term mental health of populations which have endured such a crisis, or the impact of sustained isolation for vulnerable people, or the legacy of domestic abuse and fractured family relationships.

Most significantly, during the pandemic we have experienced the reality of death more keenly. Whereas

previously death was mostly out of view, recent events in many European communities have brought us closer to death and dying, raising deeper and more ultimate questions for many of us.

Signals of hope

Paradoxically, during the pandemic there have been signs of hope, positive signals of what the future could look like.

There have been many acts of kindness, as neighbours and even strangers have sought to help the vulnerable or elderly. There has been a growing sense of community, and the importance of inter-dependence. I write this in the UK, where one of our problems – unlike much of Europe – is the tendency to be insular and independent. We don't talk to each other in the shops or on London underground trains. But one UK journalist has written that 'there has been a sudden, shocking outbreak of friendliness in London ... Now people are smiling at each other, grateful for small courtesies. A man I've lived opposite for 20 years introduced himself for the first time.' (She added that our secret weapon as a nation could be that we're excellent at queuing.) For those of us in the UK, it has been inspiring to hear Italians singing together from their balconies.

Then there has also been a greater honouring of low-paid workers – the cleaners, the delivery drivers, the shop workers – who serve the community at some risk whilst others self-isolate. There is a desire to do more to help the homeless; there has been some re-ordering of life to create more quiet reflection and thought, even to reflect on our humanity and our mortality. And as we connect more with the natural world in the quiet and less polluted atmosphere, we have a stronger desire to protect the environment. These are all small signals of hope.

The loss of hope

Nevertheless, it seems that the present crisis has simply added fuel to the fire of existing fears and anxieties about human life and destiny. A senior BBC journalist recently wrote a book whose title gave the game away – *Not Quite World's End* – and which he introduced in the following way:

Sometimes it seems there are so many threats to our life and prosperity that it's hard to choose which of them to concentrate on. Human existence is becoming a little like one of those video games where you are a soldier dodging down endless corridors with some ludicrously large weapon in

your hands, while enemies of every conceivable description jump out at you from all sides.¹

And it's true, isn't it? Whether it is the uncertainties of global climate change, the turbulence in the Middle East, the threat from rogue states or terrorism, the economic downturn, the fear of global pandemics – each has contributed to a global mood of uncertainty and insecurity. In his book *The Future*, former US Vice President Al Gore has written about the many challenges we are facing, and he declares that 'the future ... now casts a shadow upon the present'². This is a fault-line in our culture, a deep vulnerability and anxiety that many people express. It's been well said that if you are anxious about what is happening, you need to see a psychiatrist; but if you *aren't* anxious, you *definitely* need to see a psychiatrist.

If there is one thing with which the human heart cannot cope it is the lack of hope. Some years ago, a report about the business community in Wall Street Manhattan commented that many young people leave their desks and laptops to visit the Gypsy Tea Kettle in their lunch break where, for \$15, they could have a consultation with a psychic. One 30 year-old business

1 John Simpson, *Not Quite World's End* (London: Pan Books, 2008).

2 Al Gore, *The Future* (W.H.Allen, 2013), p. xxiii.

woman was asked why so many did this. She replied: 'Psychics are more valuable than friends. They can see where you're going and give you hope for the future.'

Even before the onset of the 2020 pandemic, many young people across our continent had succumbed to one of today's most prevalent diseases—Europessimism. Social commentators tell us that this generation of young people is more anxious, more uncertain about the future, than recent generations. This is the first generation of young people in a century to have less high hopes than their parents.

And without true hope, people turn to substitutes of all kinds. In a two-page spread about dogs in *The Times* newspaper, several writers spoke about how their canine companions are helping them get through the self-isolation during the pandemic. 'The world feels a better, infinitely more hopeful place when he is by my side', wrote Emily Dean, author of *Everybody Died, So I Got a Dog*. But for others, the substitutes for hope might be the escapist routes of drug and alcohol abuse; it might be self-indulgence, which attempts to maximise on present experience as a way of avoiding thinking about ultimate issues. It might be astrology, or occult practice, or superstition of all kinds, as people become desperate to gain some sense of control over their lives.