

Ephesians 1:15-23  
Psalm 149  
Mark 6:1-13

God's creative hope

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*In a sentence  
Hope is not a wish but the beginning of a new creation.*

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*What we hope for  
Where we hope  
How we hope  
How God hopes  
Where God hopes  
What God hopes for*

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'I pray', writes St Paul, 'that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know *what is the hope to which he has called you...*'

*What we hope for...*

We hope for love. We hope for understanding. We hope for acceptance. We hope for recognition, for affirmation. We hope for restoration of what has been lost, of *who* has been lost. We hope for security. We hope for justice, for vindication. We hope for healing. We hope for life. We hope for peace. We hope for hope.

*Where we hope...*

We hope from a low place, from a trough. We hope out of the experience of something having been lost, or of a promise which is not yet fulfilled. We hope out of chaos, or darkness. Recalling what we said about the book of Job a few months ago, we hope that our story follows not tragedy's plummeting path into oblivion but comedy's rising path to a restoration or fulfilment. Hope always looks up.

*How we hope...*

We might distinguish two types of hope, ultimate and penultimate. Penultimate hopes are those which seem to us to be steps on the way to our ultimate hope. Penultimate hopes invite action. Within the dark places in which we find ourselves we discern enough light to be able to work or clamour to see some of our hopes realised.

Ultimate hopes – or perhaps there is just the *one* ultimate hope – of these we also discern a shape and a location and so a way towards them, but the shape and location keeps moving. We take steps towards our ultimate hope as we work on our penultimate hopes but the ultimate finally eludes us, personally and communally. We will die before we experience our ultimate hope fulfilled.

It is important to distinguish between these two hopes because we tend to collapse them, imagining that our efforts to take the steps towards our ultimate hope could finally have brought us to fulfilling it. In this way, we make the fulfilment of our ultimate hope our own responsibility. And we disappoint ourselves.

This is human hope in brief: what we hope for, where we hope, how we hope. What, then, about *divine* hope? What and where and how does God hope?

*How God hopes...*

For us penultimate hope and ultimate hope are two things. For God they are one. When God hopes, the matter is resolved. This is to say that with God there is only ultimate hope. We said earlier that our ultimate hope is thwarted by death. It is not for nothing then that there is a death at the heart of Christian confession and the declaration that death is not the final word. God's hoping begins at the point our hope fails: at the point of nothingness and death. God hopes by creating: by calling into being that which did not exist, by raising to life what is dead.

To say that God hopes is to say that God creates. There are no penultimate hopes with God because there are no half-creations. To say that *we* cannot realise our ultimate hope is to say that we are not our own creators, that we cannot overcome our creatureliness to remake ourselves.

*Where God hopes...*

God hopes in those troughs within which we hope: within the world, generally, and within the church, particularly.

God hopes within the dissatisfaction and disorientation and the disappointment of the world. But more specifically, God hopes within the church. This is not to say we are special in any moral sense. The church is not 'above' the rest of the world but it is particular and unique. The church is that part of the world within which the hope of God is discerned, which is to say that the church is that part of the world within which God's creative activity is recognised and anticipated. Most particularly, it is here that we speak of the resurrection of the least – of the outcast, rejected and dead – and anticipate the same in ourselves. And this recognition and anticipation is itself creative. The hope of God – the creation by God – begins here.

*And, finally, what God hopes for...*

God hopes for *us*. This 'us' is, again, the church and the world, but now in the reverse order. God hopes for – creates within – the church, but not for the *church's* sake. It does not matter whether God hopes-creates apart from the church. It remains the case that what happens here happens not merely for our benefit. It happens for everyone's benefit. The church is *for* the world. If God hopes, creates, in this space, that is not the end of the story but its beginning.

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'I pray', writes St Paul, 'that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you...'

The hope to which we are called is that there is one who hopes for us, who creates us. To hope is to turn towards this one. To hope is to expect to be created. This is to see in our disorder and in the shadow of death in our lives the same kind of chaos over which God's Spirit once moved to bring the world into being, the same kind of death which the cross was. And it is to expect that, over us as over the chaos and the cross, the hope-full creative word of God will be spoken: Be. Mine.

Yet, to hear that creative word and to rise to it is not to be called and elevated out of the world. To be of this God is not to be buffered from chaos and death. To hear the creative word and to rise to it is to begin to learn to hope as God hopes. To be of *this* God is to begin to create. For us, too, hoping means creating.

The hope to which we are called is to be creatures who create. It is to do as God does: to love where there is none, to bless where a curse is expected, to have mercy where harsh justice is demanded. It is to give more than is asked for. It is to be light in dark places.

'I pray', writes St Paul, 'that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you..'

...and that you may become part of that hope, for the healing of the whole world.

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