

Hope without action is just wishful thinking

Last week our theme was peace. John spoke to us about how “shalom” is both a greeting and a farewell; how the experience of peace involves acknowledging conflict whilst opening ourselves to release from conflict; and how peace is an experience that can flow from deep within us and spill over onto others.

This week our theme is hope, and there is a clear synergy with the topic of peace.

An absence of peace (the presence of conflict) prompts desire or a wish for change; change that can bring about peace or satisfying circumstances or achievement. For example, I’m disturbed by the way women are treated in society and wish they were more respected. I wish my garden would flourish more than it does. I wish I was fitter, and had more time with my family. I wish the tidal mudflats that support the migration of birds from Australia to the Arctic weren’t being covered with buildings. This absence of peace, these disturbed feelings, prompt a projection of how I wish that things were otherwise.

This kind of dissatisfaction or distress could get us stuck in wishful thinking, if it weren’t for hope.

I think my work as a psychologist can offer us an illustration of some of the facets of hope.

The people who come to me for psychological treatment are seeking release from inner conflict or pain; they come seeking peace. They are hopeful, at least to some degree, that things could be otherwise: the juxtaposition of conflict and peace that John spoke about last week.

How do people find me? Clients arrive in my consulting room because they learn, somehow, that there are people called psychologists in our community who can help with all kinds of mental and emotional health problems. Someone has told them this. Our gospel reading this morning was about John the Baptist, the voice calling in the wilderness: prepare the way for change! Take heart! Be hopeful! So the first thing we learn about hope is that it involves communication. We need to know that there are options for change, that there is help out there, in order to become hopeful.

The fact that clients come to see me, that they make the effort to arrange an appointment and a referral from their doctor and the money for the fee and their transport to my clinic, shows us the second interesting thing about hope: it prompts action.

Energised by hope for a chance of recovery or release from suffering, people take action to come to a psychology appointment. They arrive and tell me about their pain, depression, anxiety, past trauma, substance dependence, troubled relationships. This is an act of great courage and trust. A hope-fuelled act.

Mostly, because of my particular skill set, the people I see are living with persistent physical pain of some kind: musculoskeletal pain, arthritis, pain from other treatments like chemotherapy, or from conditions like diabetes or endometriosis. Many are desperate,

understandably, and suffer anxiety and depression as well as their physical pain. They want their pain to go away and the emotional and mental suffering to stop.

Often I ask people at the start of therapy: do you think your pain can change? And just as often, people reply: I hope so! What do you think needs to happen, for your pain to change? I ask. This is an important question: if the person is waiting for a magic medicine or operation to remove their pain, I know I have my work cut out for me. The salve for persistent pain is, by and large, action – the right action – on the part of the sufferer, not on the part of doctors or drug companies. The hope-fuelled action that the person took to get to me needs to continue in order for their hope of relief to be realised. It's actually easier if people answer my question with "I don't know – I just want the pain to stop!" Then I can help them gather and build the skills that will lead them down the recovery path. If they don't yet know that ongoing action on their part is the thing that will help them, they're stuck in wishful thinking and haven't yet garnered enough hope.

It's understandable at the start of therapy that a client's hope for recovery may be minimal. I have the privilege of knowledge from my training and research, and experience from working with other people in pain, so I can be more certain of the outcome than my client. The first part of my job is to fan their small spark of hope. I have to build the client's faith in me as a therapist and what I'm suggesting as treatment, so that they will be willing to continue on the journey towards recovery. So here's the third interesting thing about hope: it is closely intertwined with faith.

Having won sufficient faith, the client and I embark on therapy because we are both hopeful of improvement. The process of therapy isn't just about me listening to the person, sympathising with them or encouraging them. All these things are important, but therapy is a much more active process of sharing knowledge, setting goals and the steps to take towards them, experimenting with new skills and problem-solving obstacles. Hope fuels this activity which show us a fourth facet: moving forward with hope is frequently an interpersonal process.

So hope is an active process directed towards achievement, or a betterment of things: changing attitudes in society, planting a garden, improving health and wellbeing, protecting important natural habitats are all acts of hope. We have to know that there are other options to pursue, something to aim for, to give direction to our hope-fuelled action, so communication between people, organisations, institutions is important. We have to have faith that we can take action, and in doing so we often need others to act with us. For our hopes to be transformed from mere wishes into real movement and change, we need to work with each other.

But what if we don't have the resources we need? Is the only option to resort to wishing? This is where defeat, despair and hopelessness can creep in, especially with regard to the bigger challenges. Certainly in our world at present – maybe at all times in history – there are plenty of issues that can create a sense of darkness and despairing which are beyond our capacity individually to resolve. Injustices in society, destructive treatment of the Earth and its resources, cruelty and neglect of children, inadequate education and health care. My

individual actions are important: for instance, I can put my kitchen scraps in the green bin to prevent them going to landfill where they contribute to greenhouse gas emissions – and it's better to do that than not to – but it's irrational to think that such a small action even on a continuing basis will in and of itself solve climate change.

How then do we hold onto hope, and not get stuck in wishing, frustration, and despair?

We need to know that these larger scale issues can be addressed with larger scale solutions and action. Governments, action organisations, passionate individuals all have a role to play. But the ultimate transcending solution that gives us hope is the promise from an unchanging, faithful God that love will prevail.

We communicate this promise to each other, and in community we help each other remember it when despair starts to take hold. Pope Francis says “for the great human family it is necessary to renew always the common horizon to which we are journeying: the horizon of hope!”

The Advent story is of course a lovely metaphor of this, the journey towards the horizon of hope. Mary and Joseph are actually travelling down our hallway at home at present. Along the wall is a row of evenly-spaced stars, and each day Mary, Joseph and their little felt donkey travel along to the next star, which Grace takes and sticks on the wall behind the stable scene that waits in the family room. By the time the travellers arrive in the family room on Christmas Eve the sky will be aglow with 24 stars! We have a book of stories (“The Light in the Lantern”) for each day of Advent, and we read about the challenges the little party encounters and the miracles that occur to help them on their way. Paths are made straight, rough ways are made smooth, mountains are brought low and valleys raised.

In these stories, God each day rekindles Mary and Joseph's hope and faith in the transcendent solutions that flow from certain love. They experience conflict, discomfort, an absence of peace, but armed with hope and faith that resources will be provided, they continue to take action: they walk one more day towards Bethlehem. And their hope-fuelled action is eventually rewarded: God, who can't do otherwise, remains faithful and protects them to the end – in surprising ways, to be sure, with the stable and the manger – and ensures the safe arrival in the world of the Christ Child. The Christ who grows up and communicates the “horizon of hope” to all, which in turn directs our ongoing actions, if we choose, towards the realisation and triumph of love in our world.

Now, I'm nearly done but I can't finish without a bird story!

The dawn chorus is an amazing experience, especially for someone like me who is certainly **not** a morning person; the chance of me being up and about at 5am to hear the cacophony of bird calls before the sunrise is pretty remote. However, I do often enjoy the dawn chorus from the comfort of my bed.

In particular, I've noticed an early and sweet song that consists of an upward tone followed by a gentle descending run of notes. The song comes from one side of the garden, and then a few seconds later it is echoed by another bird some distance further away. It is like the birds are calling “good morning” to each other.

And indeed, they are! There are various theories about the purpose of the dawn chorus, but most agree that birds sing before sunrise to re-claim their territory, and to let everyone else in their flock know where they are and that they made it through the night. They're reconnecting their communities, communicating via song.

Many of you will have heard this beautiful quote from Rabindranth Tagore:

"Faith is the bird that feels the light and sings when the dawn is still dark."

Birds sing in the dark because of the certain expectation that the sun will shortly rise. Even though the event of the sunrise is yet to occur, the birds communicate with each other and thereby begin the activity of a new day, telling each other "good morning! I'm still here! I'm with you!" even while there is only a glimmer of evidence that sun will actually rise. I think this is a lovely illustration of the connectedness and activity of hope and faith, and I like to think of the dawn chorus now as an inspiring song of hope that reminds me that light and love in all sorts of ways – small and large – can overcome darkness and despair, even in times when there is only the slightest glimmer of evidence that that is the case.

A song of hope can only be lifted when there is certain expectation of a coming dawn. Mary and Joseph travelling to Bethlehem give us an example of faith and hope in action. The source of their hope, and ours, is a God whose love is complete and constant, a God who is always available to us, and a God who continually invites us to create signs of a love-filled future here and now, in the midst of all the present difficulties of our world.

A letter by Brother Roger from the Taize community in France refers to Christian hope as "a source of energy to live differently". For wishful thinking to be transformed, we need communities of people who communicate and share with each other, who take action that is fuelled by hope, so that God's love can be realised.

- Annie Hopkins