

## 14<sup>th</sup> June 2020: Romans 5:1-8, Matthew 9:35-38 – The good news of hope

**Hope.** It's a tricky word to define, isn't it? What does hope mean to you? For some people, hope is little more than wishful thinking. I hope that things might change... but they probably won't. For others, hope is a confident word, an expectation that we'll get there, one way or another.

A few moments ago, we watched the round-up video from Thy Kingdom Come 2020, and in it Pope Francis gave a very profound and honest assessment of the state of the world at present: 'Today,' he said, 'our world is experiencing a tragic famine of hope.'

His words are well worth reflecting on. In all the practical solutions to the current crisis which quite rightly we seek at present – a vaccine, provision of employment and adequate finances, opportunities to meet and gather, and so on – there is another – underlying need which is just as important, and that is *a sense of hope*.

I remember a well-known Christian leader 25 years ago talking about the large investment at the time in renewing large tower blocks in deprived urban areas. Millions would be spent on redecorating and improving amenities, and then he would visit a year or two later and the lifts would be broken again, and the stairwells would stink, and the play areas would be vandalised... This leader observed that the one thing these makeovers could never provide was hope. No amount of double glazing and pictures on the walls could change that.

Perhaps Jesus too felt something similar as he gazed out on the crowds. Thousands were following him, hanging on his every word, seeking healing in prayer, experiencing community. But he saw behind the enthusiasm: he saw a nation which was 'harassed and helpless', leaderless and rudderless.

Many of us perhaps can now understand this passage in ways that we couldn't until this year. So much has happened which is totally outside our control. We feel powerless, helpless. And also harassed by big decisions: can we see our families? Should I send my children to school? Is it safe to get on public transport to work?

Perhaps we do indeed face what Pope Francis calls that tragic famine of hope. But **there is good news today. What we believe is all about hope.** Hope is not wishful thinking: according to the bible, *hope is the confident expectation that things will be better than they are now*. There are certain truths and realities that we hold onto which we can never lose, no matter what our circumstances. Our God is the God of abundant life and eternal love.

Our second reading from Romans is all about hope: the 'hope of the glory of God', the hope 'which does not disappoint us or put us to shame'. But in our passage **there are two ways to hope**. The first is the way we'd all prefer: Paul describes a inspiring journey - God's grace leads to faith, faith leads to peace, and peace leads to hope. I like that journey. Rooted in the mercy and grace of God, we believe that Jesus has set us free and risen again. The certainty of our future with him produces peace in our hearts, and true hope. That we will never be alone, that we are forgiven, that we can look forward to life forever with God.

However, there is also another way to hope. Paul is honest that, for many of us, where we start is with suffering. Paul knew more about this than most, so he's talking from experience here. And, as he says, 'suffering produces perseverance, perseverance produces character, and character also produces – you guessed it – hope.'

Let's be honest, none of us would choose this route. But we also know that there are times in our lives when this is the path we have to tread. And *the encouragement is that God is just as much at work, perhaps even more so, in this journey as the other one*. Hard times sort of get to the bottom of things, don't they? We gain a perspective on the nature of life and a clearer set of priorities about what really matters. And coming through hard times also makes us stronger. We grow in character, and that confidence that we can survive, that we can endure, produces hope.

The bottom line is: **whichever path we tread, the goal is hope**. Our good news is that there is hope. Hope in what we believe, but also hope in how we endure and come out the other side. Perhaps this second, harder path is where many of us are at present: so today we need these words more than ever. Nothing is bigger than God. God is at work, He is always with us and will lead us through and out the other side.

So, as Pope Francis said, **let us be those who radiate hope**. Sickness, debt, social distancing, inequality, unemployment, domestic abuse, even death itself *never* has the last word. God's love has been poured out into our hearts, and our eternal future is secure. This is our good news of hope. Amen.