

**Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> July 2020**  
**“Hope in times of change”**

**Part one:**

> I really hope that ..... its easy to complete the sentence yourself, but here's a few examples:

I really hope that – the bus comes along soon 'cause I'm getting frozen to the spot.

I really hope the train is running to time or I'll miss the connection.

I really hope that its not going to rain 'cause I've left the washing on the line.

> That is the way that we make use of the word “hope” in everyday terms – either for something to happen or not in the future. And have you noticed that in all the examples I have just quoted they all refer to ‘me’.

> I don't want to get cold, I don't want to be stranded at a train station in the middle of nowhere all night, I don't want to have to do the laundry all over again etc.

> It's all self-centred and within a specific timescale.

> In our time together today however, I invite you to think about a very different sort of ‘hope’.

> The source of our information will be Paul's letter to the church in Rome which has the largest number of occurrences of the word ‘hope’ in the entire New Testament.

> Paul sets up what he is writing about in the opening verse: “the gospel of God”.

> And hope is an important aspect of that Gospel.

> I'm going to take a look at this Gospel Hope briefly from four different angles – and we begin with how we are able to be a part of it.

**Reading:** Romans 5: 1-5

> This passage is so densely packed it would be easy to produce a whole series of sermons on it – but that is not for today.

> Let me mention a few key facts:

> First of all, is the foundational principle of our Reformed angle on Christianity – justification by faith – to be less technical – if we respond to God through faith then we can live in right relations with our creator. It doesn't depend on any action by us – we don't have to work to earn God's love, just respond in love. Simple as that!

> Second – the way this has become possible is because of what Jesus freely did for us through His life, death and resurrection life.

> It is the third aspect that is of note for today, and is the third person of the Trinity: the Holy Spirit.

> Because Paul tells us that the way we experience hope is through the gracious gift of the Holy Spirit:

“hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.” (v5)

> Thus the first thing to notice about hope found in God – it that it is a gift from God – and it is of God enabled by Jesus and mediated to us through the Holy Spirit.  
> God's hope is something that we couldn't even understand without the help of the Holy Spirit as Paul explains in his first letter to the church in Corinth; "the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God" (2:12).

> It is God's hope that will carry us through these difficult and uncertain times of lockdown where so much has changed already and there is more change to come as we try to discern what the 'new normal' will be.

> The old (familiar) has gone – it's in the past – and the loss may be troublesome for many – and not knowing what will replace it will be equally stressful too.

> It is the nearly indescribable hope found only in God that will see us through as Eugene Peterson translates Paul so well as saying;

"We continue to shout our praise even when we're hemmed in with troubles, because we know how troubles can develop passionate patience in us, and how that patience in turn forges the tempered steel of virtue, keeping us alert for whatever God will do next. In alert expectancy such as this, we're never left feeling short-changed. Quite the contrary—we can't round up enough containers to hold everything God generously pours into our lives through the Holy Spirit!"  
(Romans 5)

## **Part two**

**Reading:** Romans 8: 18-25

> I'll continue to follow our theme of hope in line with Paul who wrote to the early church who were living through difficult times. They faced severe problems and persecution in those early days in Rome which are so different from the times that we are living in – but I think we can still be uplifted by Paul's words in our situation of still being under partial lockdown and worries about health.

> We are facing our own difficulties and worries as our familiar pattern of life has changed dramatically and it's unlikely that it will ever be quite the same again. But God's hope will sustain us through times of change.

> As stable as the church and our faith might seem – it is always growing and adapting – we are not members of an historical re-enactment society even though we may enjoy hymns written a long time ago and use texts thousands of years old as the basis of our faith.

> We are part of a faith that adapts to connect with people as the world changes – God, the source of our faith remains stable, but society constantly changes and church does too, albeit rather more slowly. Even our great hymns, such as "Rock of Ages" was new once!

> As the words of another of our great hymns so well describes.  
“All my hope on God is founded; he doth still my trust renew. Me through change and chance he guideth, only good and only true.”

> Our firm, stable connection to God that anchors us through unsettling times is what I'd like us to think about next.

> A couple of weeks ago we looked at how the voice of praise continues across generations, lives on today and will continue onward into the future.

> Our setting in this very moment, and our hopes for the future are the subject of Paul's letter written so long ago and this sense of God's hope spanning time is the subject of a fascinating article by Paul Tillich titled “The Eternal Now”.

> Typical of Tillich, it's a bit heavy-going to read, but what he has to say really makes you think.

> I'll try to summarise: When you start to analyse what the present time is, it all gets a bit complex – for example – there is time difference between when I wrote this and when I read it, and both events are now already in the past as you watch. It's not quite as easy as it seems to define the present – is it just now, or today or what?

> Anyway less of the philosophical debate.

> Basically, the past matters a lot, it shapes us to live in the present – and we move onward into the future, much of which is unknown, or at least difficult to predict with certainty.

> Living from the past into the present moment and onward into the future, especially in uncertain times is a scary thought if all we have to rely on is ourselves – but we don't.

> Through the gracious gift of God and the presence of the Holy Spirit we are connected into the presence of God through Jesus – and John's Gospel tells us that Jesus existed even before time began and always will be.

> In Jesus we can live in the presence of the Alpha and Omega – the one who was and is and always will be. And in that presence we live in hope.

> That is what hope is about – God's enduring, unchanging presence that that is the sure foundation of life – even though life ebbs and flows - God always was and is – and will always be so.

> That is what God's hope is about – its about the joy of life in what Tillich calls; the eternal now”.

### **Part three**

**Reading:** Romans 12: 9-12

- > We live in the moment, shaped by the past and always moving onward into the future – and all the while in partnership with God of all time and beyond time.
- > That stretches the mind a bit – so, in practical terms what does hope in the eternal now look like, feel like, work like?
- > Paul gives us the concise answer in chapter 12:
- > Love – keep away from evil and genuinely love one another with mutual regard. Be patient in suffering – and many of us need that assurance right now, and rejoice in hope.
- > Notice that last phrase – hope gives us much more than just the resources to get by in difficult times – God’s hope enables us to even be joyful! I don’t think it means some sort of veneer of a smiley face whilst feeling terrible on the inside – it much deeper than that – a deep-seated assurance that we will get through whatever life throws at us in the company of Jesus.
- > The other part of this passage, that is the focus for this reflection, is the importance of prayer.
- > It’s part of loving one another – to be able to support each other by asking for God’s intercession when its needed – and, of course to give thanks and praise to God too.
- > It’s all a part of that continuing connection between our now and God’s forever when we join together in our prayer conversations with God.

### **Part four**

**Reading:** Romans 15: 12

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

> This verse reads like a closing doxology. It’s near the end of the letter that Paul wrote – and it is the final thought that I want to share with you.

> Several years ago the Methodist Church produced an excellent little booklet called “Hope in your pocket” and I’ll read part of the concluding comments by Mark Wakelin;

“Hope isn’t a form of optimism, putting a positive spin on a difficult situation, calling half empty half full. It is the skill of seeing now in the light of eternity, of understanding what is, in the knowledge of what will be. Hope is the frame of mind of those who choose to believe in God’s promise that one day all will be made new. Hope doesn’t make you feel comfortable, it isn’t soothing and relaxing, its sets your heart beating with new possibilities.....”

> I'm not so sure about describing hope as a 'skill' – I regard it more as the being open enough, letting go of our own agenda enough to fully accept the gracious gift of hope.

> If we do – then as Paul says – that gift will fill us – it's not something to just compartmentalise, God's hope fills us, and as Walkelin describes it, will set our hearts beating – beating with that deep-seated peace and joy so that we may "abound in hope"

> I'll leave the last words to Paul as translated in "The Message"

"Oh! May the God of green hope fill you up with joy, fill you up with peace, so that your believing lives, filled with the life-giving energy of the Holy Spirit, will brim over with hope!"