

HOPE IN A TIME OF PANDEMIC

‘The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts.’ [*Gaudium et Spes*, 1]

These are the words with which the great Constitution on the *Church in the World* of the Second Vatican Council begins. It could also be the beginning of a description of the life of Elizabeth Prout in whose honour this lecture is being given tonight. Elizabeth came from a background of refinement and privilege but left it all behind at the call of Christ. She left the safety and security of her home to come to Angel Meadow in Manchester, which Friedrich Engels described as ‘Hell on Earth’. Amid the rampant typhoid and cholera, filth and despair of the oppressed working classes who had come from the horrors of the Irish famine to the factories of Manchester in desperate search of work, food and shelter, Elizabeth found an echo in her heart of the words of Jesus himself, ‘Whatsoever you do to the least of my brothers and sisters you do it to me’ [Mt. 25:40]. It is a significant honour for me to have been asked to give this lecture in her name and in her abiding memory.

Elizabeth lived at a time of massive social change and upheaval and in a context of virulent disease. The privilege of the few was maintained at the cost of the misery of the majority and there were few who responded to their plight or even questioned why this should be so in the first place. Above all she lived at a time of rapid and bewildering technological advance which held out the promise of prosperity for all, but the promise proved to be an illusion. Today we live in a society when the theory of trickle-down economics is proving increasingly hollow. It has, for the vast majority, simply failed to deliver. I have no need to tell you that things are looking bleak, even for us in the relative prosperity and safety of the British Isles and Ireland. Not only are we threatened by a pandemic which defies all attempts to control it, but we are perhaps even more broadly threatened by the social and economic impact that the pandemic is having on our families, our industries and on the way of life which we have come to identify as the norm. Populist ideologies and the politics of celebrity have left us with a desperate vacuum of leadership. While our political masters quibble at extending the offer of free school meals to hungry children during school holidays, it falls to a young footballer to remind us that there should be no place for hungry children in a civilised society. People of colour have become tired of the embedded assumption that being white is a ticket to privilege and opportunity and are reminding us forcefully that their lives matter. Of course, it is true that every life matters, but in a country which outlawed slavery over 200 years ago, it appears that having a black skin is still frequently the cause of significant social and economic disadvantage. Legislation has been enshrined in the United Kingdom and in many countries in the so-called developed world for decades which outlaws discrimination on the grounds of gender. And yet we are aware that an outrageous pay gap still exists from the top of the pay scale to the bottom. The potential of women to lead and to contribute fully with their God-given talents and capacities continues to be stifled and ignored and nowhere is this more obvious than in the church whose first disciple was a woman.

I feel tempted to quote to you from G.K. Chesterton's *Ballad of the White Horse*, an epic poem in which the embattled King Alfred of Britain, surrounded on all sides by his enemies, pleads for help to the Virgin Mary. In that rather disconcerting way that she has of responding sometimes to those who pray to her, she replies:

"I tell you naught for your comfort,
Yea, naught for your desire,
Save that the sky grows darker yet
And the sea rises higher."

Her message would seem to be one encouraging of gloom and despair, and yet in fact it is a call to arms. It's the very call to arms that, in the depths of her soul, Elizabeth Prout heard, and to which she responded, tiny and frail as she was, with such ardent charity and dauntless zeal. My own response to the invitation to speak to you about hope in a time of pandemic has been to look at the words of recent theologians and at the writings of the great saints of the past, because there is one thing that is certain. If we look at the history of the human race, there has never been a time when nothing particular was happening. The Chinese are alleged to have a curse, 'May you live in interesting times. Well, all times are interesting and every present moment in the history of humankind has been an invitation and a challenge to hope.

In 2007 Pope Benedict wrote an encyclical entitled *Spe Salvi*, 'in hope we are saved'. It is a powerful reflection on the virtue of hope and its relation to faith. We know that the three cardinal virtues are faith hope and love. While St Paul tells us that the greatest of these is love, it becomes clear that without faith there can be no genuine hope, and without these two there can be no lasting love. The celebrity obsessed and consumer-oriented culture in which we presently live offer us many initially attractive alternatives to faith, hope and love, but these eventually all prove ephemeral. We are urged to put our faith in technology, our hope in progress and our love in whatever offers immediate satisfaction. But the rising tide of depressive illness in the developed nations should give us pause before we feast too greedily on these Dead Sea fruits. It would seem that the more we have, the more we crave and the emptier we feel. The Covid pandemic has brought home to us like nothing else the pain of human isolation and disconnection. In many ways it has held up a mirror to us in which we can see so much more clearly the fragmentation of human relationships which has become so normalised that we barely notice anymore how lonely we are. In *Spe Salvi* Pope Benedict quotes the first letter to the Thessalonians where Paul tells the faithful not to 'grieve as others do who have no hope'. [1 Th. 4:13] He sees 'as a distinguishing mark of Christians the fact that they have a future'. He points out that 'Christianity was not only "good news"—the communication of a hitherto unknown content [...] the Christian message was not only "informative" but "performative". That means: The Gospel is not merely a communication of things that can be known—it is one that makes things happen and is life-changing. The dark door of time, of the future, has been thrown open. The one who has hope lives differently'.

Let's listen to that again: the one who has hope lives differently. Well, do we? And if we don't, why not? If hope is performative rather than informative it means that it's not enough for us simply to tell people about our faith. We must live it and live its conclusions effectively and convincingly.

Being a Christian isn't just about knowing hope or talking about it. It's about being hope and doing hope. 'Redemption is offered to us', Pope Benedict continues, 'in the sense that we have been given [...] trustworthy hope, by

virtue of which we can face our present: the present, even if it is arduous, can be lived and accepted if it leads towards a goal, if we can be sure of this goal, and if this goal is great enough to justify the effort of the journey.' [*Spe Salvi*, 1]

This is not a new message. In the 14th century England lost one third of its population to the bubonic plague. War and huge social change caused an uprising of the peasants amid famine and high prices and religious conflict caused believers of different perspectives to kill one another with enthusiasm. It all sounds wearily familiar. In the bustling and prosperous town of Norwich, an anchoress called Julian received two apparently contradictory revelations. She worried greatly about sin and its effect in the world, as well as the terrible price that Jesus had to pay to redeem us from sin itself. What was shown her was that 'sin must needs be', by which she meant sin is a necessary evil, a fact of life – it's how things are. But she also heard Jesus say, 'but all shall be well. All shall be well; and all manner thing shall be well'. [*Revelations of Divine Love*, 27]

Julian found this difficult to accept, responding, 'but how can all be well in face of the great harm that is come by sin to thy creatures?' [*Revelations*, 29]

In this question Julian touches on the great dilemma for all people of faith. We are asked to believe that God is supremely in charge, that everything that ever happens is held in God's hands, sustained by God's power and loving will and yet we are surrounded on all sides by evidence to the contrary.

Julian's question is echoed by the Virgin Mary in Luke's account of the Annunciation. Luke bases his story on a passage from the Hebrew scriptures in which, at a moment of terrible crisis for God's people, the Angel appears to Gideon and calls upon him to save them. Gideon is hiding from his enemies when the Angel appears, saying, 'The Lord is with you, mighty warrior'. Gideon is not impressed and says to the angel, 'Excuse me for asking but if the Lord is with us how come all these terrible things are happening, where are all the wonders that we are told God used to work for our ancestors, now that we are surrounded by death and danger?' It's a reasonable question, but the angel is having none of it, and replies, 'Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand. Am I not sending you?' [Judges 6 ff]

Mary's question to the angel Gabriel is similar, 'How can this be, since I'm a virgin?' She's not only asking a biological question, but she's commenting on the fact that, as a woman, and an unmarried woman at that, she has no power of any sort, not even the economic power of producing future workers. She counts, quite literally, for nothing. To both Gideon and Mary, and later to Julian of Norwich, the answer is the same, 'I will be with you'.

We are not only challenged by God to have faith in the teeth of contradictory evidence but also to have hope beyond hope. It is hope that God's power can and does overcome human choices for evil and all the natural evils and disasters like sickness and political conflict and war that were raging in Julian's lifetime, and those of Gideon and Mary. It's also hope that, fragile though we feel ourselves to be, we are enough. This isn't some kind of divine pep talk, with Gabriel as an angelic Mr Motivator. This is the powerful revelation that when we live in intimate relationship with Christ, nothing can separate us from God's love. On our own we are powerless, and we know this. With God, all things are possible, even survival of a pandemic and its far-reaching economic and social impact.

The last thing Julian or the Bible are peddling is a false, jaunty optimism in the face of grim reality. Mary's song of triumph later on in Luke is not whistling in the dark. It speaks of God casting the mighty from their thrones, filling the starving with good things and thwarting the ambition of those who rely on their money and power. She had seen enough of tyranny, hunger, poverty and oppression to know it up close and personal. She lived it in her own flesh and that of her family. Yet this revelation is the one reflected on by

St. Paul, who began by trying to bend others to his own will by manipulating the Law of God, and came to understand strength in weakness, wisdom in the folly of the Cross.

Hope, then, is not about optimistically wishing that things will come right in the end. It's a matter of staring hard reality in the face but trusting that God's power can truly be at work in the worst of human circumstances. It's a matter of trusting that, in close relationship with Jesus, even our poor efforts can make a difference to how the world is and will be.

Later on, in chapter 32 of her *Revelations* Julian writes, 'He wills that we know that he takes heed not only of noble things and great, but also of little and small, low and simple [...] for he wills that we know that the least thing shall not be forgotten'.

Hope is a great power in the world, but it is built on our understanding and trusting the 'God of little things' – the same God who in Jesus tells us to become like little children if we wish to be part of the kingdom. It is the same God who over and over again chooses the weak and makes them strong, who chooses sinners like ourselves to bring about the divine purpose and who says, 'I will be with you until the end of time'.

This is the foundation of Christian hope, and it is built on our capacity to love and embrace the present moment as a promise of the richness within it, even if that richness is beyond our gaze and our understanding. Pope Francis, who is one of the most resolute apostles of hope in our present time, speaks in *The Joy of the Gospel* of 'the joy which we experience daily, amid the little things of life' [4]. 'The least thing', says Julian, 'shall not be forgotten'. One of the things that has saved us during this pandemic has been the remembering of the contribution and sacrifice made by all those who make ordinary life possible. We began by clapping for the NHS workers, but for many of us this brought to our understanding a greater appreciation for all the key workers whose hidden and often unappreciated care of us has made civil society a context of surety. Over and over again in his latest encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, Francis emphasises the need for encounter and reminds us of the hidden richness of encounters which most of us take for granted. Speaking about the impact of the pandemic he says,

'We began to realize that our lives are interwoven with and sustained by ordinary people valiantly shaping the decisive events of our shared history: doctors, nurses, pharmacists, storekeepers and supermarket workers, cleaning personnel, caretakers, transport workers, men and women working to provide essential services and public safety, volunteers, priests and religious... They understood that no one is saved alone [51]

As in *Spe Salvi* he sees hope not as informative but as performative. He sees hope as performed in the sacrament of encounter. A sacrament is a sign which makes real what it signifies. When we begin, as Elizabeth Prout began, to look into the eyes of ordinary people and see a sister or a brother, we become open, through that encounter, to the gift that they are to us. She began to see the unseen, to notice the unnoticed and these encounters became for her the living embodiment of the hope of the resurrection, surrounded as she was by Jesus crucified, suffering and humiliated in the poor. Jesus, who died in apparent despair on the Cross, did not bring about social revolution, but promised the man dying next to him an encounter with the living God and thus an encounter with hope.

In Albert Camus' novel *The Plague*, a Jesuit called Paneloux preaches two sermons. He preaches the first one to a cathedral packed full of desperate people, terrified by the onset of bubonic plague in their town into turning to God for the first time in years. The sermon begins: 'Brothers and sisters, we are suffering. Brothers and sisters, we are getting what we deserve.'

He tells them that this appalling holocaust is God's way of teaching people how dependent they are on divine help by punishing the townspeople for their sins and bringing them back to the obedience that they

owe. Paneloux' words fit neatly into his theological system but show little awareness or concern for the human cost of suffering. But the preacher is about to learn a harsh lesson. Being a good Jesuit, he volunteers to nurse the dying, and is at hand when the little son of the town's judge dies in agony. The book's hero, a doctor and an unbeliever, had been present at the first sermon. He looks over the child's bed to the priest and says: 'This one, at least, was innocent.'

In the aftermath of the boy's death Paneloux preaches a second sermon. The cathedral is less full. God has delivered no instant solution to their hopes, so the bereaved plague survivors have turned to other securities. The priest's certainties are shattered by the brutal experience of innocent suffering. With humility and resignation, he preaches a mysterious God whose ways are not ours, and who permits suffering for reasons at which we cannot guess. Shortly afterwards, Paneloux himself becomes ill and dies, his cause of death tellingly in doubt.

Preaching or lecturing about faith, hope and love in a time of pandemic presents a unique challenge. There is a perilous path to be trodden between offering smug panaceas that convince no one or sounding judgmental. What sort of a sermon might we have preached or wanted to hear in the aftermath of 9/11, at a memorial service for the Nazi Holocaust or the Irish Famine or at the funeral of a beloved child? A person in search of faith might want a sermon which makes sense of the big questions: if God is all-loving, how can so much evil and suffering take place? If God is all-powerful, why does God not act to prevent it? A person trying to hold on to their faith might hope to reconcile their image of the loving protector and saviour with the cruel realities of life. Believers often find themselves arguing on God's behalf, seeking to explain or even justify this One in whom they believe and trust, but whose ways are strange, not only to those who don't believe, but also, and sometimes more painfully, to those who do.

God invites us, 'Turn to me and be saved, for I am God. There is no other.' [Is. 45:22]. This God is the only one we've got. We might want another one, a God we understand better, or who is more predictable, but God is God, there is no other. We cannot change God, so if we are to resolve some of these challenging questions our only hope is to change ourselves and our perspective on God. In general, religiously oriented people hold one of two approaches to suffering. These have been called the meaning context and the support context.¹ The meaning context presumes that God is the direct cause of suffering and causes it for a specific reason. We try to see our suffering from God's perspective, in order to understand it and therefore cope with it better. We expect God to take our suffering away and if this is not forthcoming, we at least pray that God will reveal the reason for sending it, so that we can suffer with a sense of meaning and coherence. There are many people who cannot believe in God precisely because they make these attempts to understand suffering and are devastated when they fail.

In the support context mindset, people are not asking 'Why, God?' but, 'How? Help me, God'. The assumption is that God gives strength for us to live, and strength in suffering. The foundation of faith and hope here are an experienced relationship with God. The resolution of suffering comes not from figuring out the answer to the mystery of God but from the conviction that God is with us. God-with-us is made visible in Christ who hangs on the Cross with us, whose body is in agony every day in the bodies of suffering children, women and men. The ability to experience oneness with the suffering Christ allows us to perceive what is potentially faith-threatening as faith-integrating. This is what Elizabeth Prout came to understand in the Manchester slums.

Jesus' followers don't suffer less than others. His own mother had her heart pierced with the sword of sorrow. In the dreadful litany of deaths that came out of Italy in the first lockdown, priests who ministered to those suffering from the virus were struck down themselves and elderly nuns in their care

¹ See Richard Hauser, *Finding God in Troubled Times* (Loyola University Press, 2003)

homes died in their dozens. Being a Christian doesn't make suffering lighter, or significantly easier. St. Paul exclaims: 'I have been crucified with Christ', but he goes on to say, 'Yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me.' [Gal.2:20]

This union with Jesus crucified and risen is the goal of the Christian life. In him we see embodied the support context approach to suffering. Despite his pleas in Gethsemane, his suffering is neither removed nor mitigated, but he receives the gift of hope which conquers the power of death forever. Like any human being faced with the fear and agony of suffering, Jesus begs to be relieved of it, but implicit in his prayer is not the question why, but rather how? How can I bear this? The answer is given clearly: through encounter, through loving union with his God and Father. As soon as Jesus takes this to heart, we see a transformation. From then on, nothing can shake that union. When he stands before Pilate, Herod and the Sanhedrin, when he is denied by his closest friend, paraded in front of his enemies, stripped, humiliated, and nailed to a cross, his resolution is unshakable. He learns the lesson of hope in the great encounter with his Father in Gethsemane but also in the little encounters on the way to his death with Simon of Cyrene, the women of Jerusalem, his sorrowing mother, with Veronica, with the Roman centurion crucifying him, the crowds mocking him and the criminal hanging next to him. This is where we see the performance of hope by God himself, living the worst moments of the human condition.

In March another lone Jesuit stood not in a cathedral but in the eerie emptiness of St. Peter's Square, old and lame, a lonely figure under the driving rain, as he prayed for a world brought to its knees by a pandemic. Solitary though he looked, Pope Francis emphasized the closeness of Jesus to the world's pain, the commonality of suffering and the vital need of encounters of hope in such times. He tells us that hope is bold. It is embodied in 'a longing for a life of fulfilment, a desire to achieve great things' [FT 55] At the end of *The Joy of the Gospel* he speaks about mission not as something we do as Christians but something we are:

'My mission of being in the heart of the people is not just a part of my life or a badge I can take off; it is not an "extra" or just another moment in life. Instead, it is something I cannot uproot from my being without destroying my very self. I am a mission on this earth; that is the reason why I am here in this world. We have to regard ourselves as sealed, even branded, by this mission of bringing light, blessing, enlivening, raising up, healing and freeing.' [EG 273]

That was the mission lived by Elizabeth Prout. It is the mission of faith, hope and love to which we are called by virtue of our baptism, lived in the little things of life, the everyday encounters in which we find God in all things.

Glory be to him whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we could ask or imagine. Glory be to God in the church and in Christ Jesus, from generation to generation, Amen.