

Hope does not disappoint

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31; Romans 5:1-5

I have been watching the new TV drama 'Years & Years'. It's not for those of a nervous disposition, or given to bouts of depression. The futuristic family drama is currently hurtling towards its pulsating climax on BBC One. Tracing the election of a populist entrepreneur to power, followed by isolationist policies, closed borders and a crackdown on civil liberties, Years & Years could hardly feel much more "now". In 15 tumultuous years with apocalyptic rain (can weather be manipulated by technology in our world?), through dystopian political systems that represent the far right or the far left; with the United States, China and Russia vying for international dominance; with Europe on fire with extremism; with computer science dominant in public and private life, until power cuts, possibly caused by rogue nations forces people back to writing things down on paper; with 'camps' set up for immigrants, political undesirables; with cities and towns fenced into safe and non-safe communities – you might be safer listening to the Archers, celebrating Peggy Wooley's 100th birthday in Ambridge.

Years & Years hasn't finished yet and I can't tell how the issues it raises will resolve, or even if they will resolve. There are, amongst the despair and cruelty, possible chinks of hope; but I can't tell if that is what the author of the series intends, or if it is I, as a Christian, projecting into a dysfunctional creation the hope that faith gives me. But faith does give me hope.

In the real world the times are dark. Events around the Straits of Hormuz and the threat to the world oil supply as Iran and the United States square off too each other is grim. The largely forgotten open-sores of Gaza, and other parts of Israel-Palestine, the forgotten war zones in Syria and Yemen continue. Another outbreak of Ebola has been noted in the Democratic Republic of Congo and possibly Uganda. In our country the meltdown of traditional politics continues, and the reduction of political discourse to nationalism whether it is Brexit-focussed in the UK, or Scottish independence focussed in this part of the UK has largely dumbed-down intelligent debate to a cynical reality TV competition. Except this time it's our future that is being

side-lined. Good people remain, but the moderate sensible voice is being drowned out by populism that appears to pay little heed to the consequences of what it calls for. Be careful for what you wish. It is chillingly echoed by the Years & Years television programme. But faith gives me hope.

The Church is not immune to what is going on in our world. Our faith is set in context. People disengaging from institutions; people wrapped up in their own little bubbles of interest, nervous about committing to something for fear of being saddled with responsibility. Assuming things will simply continue to be done despite evidence demonstrating that there are no clear means of support. Presumptions that 'somebody else will do it' abound. In the Church we face a crisis of commitment. Maybe we are doing too much, but the too much that we do seems to have a market for people who expect provision of worship, hall space, social events, interesting discussion evenings, care for children, support for the frail and elderly. None of this happens by magic. I spoke to a lovely person last week, who was really disappointed that the Church couldn't find a mutually agreeable time and space for an organisation. "I mean, doesn't the Church want people to come in to its buildings?" Did the person come to Church? No. Believe in God? No. Contribute to Church finances out of altruism so we could support the spaces wanted for the organisation? No. "But it's your job," I was told. You get my point. But faith gives me hope.

I keep saying that. Not because it's all I have left to hold on to, but because even at the bleakest, darkest, most despairing moments, I know this to be true. My faith gives me hope. Not a hope that stops at unrealistic piety, but a hope that impels me to keep talking about faith, and insisting in decisions I make for myself, or with others in this Church and the national church, that **faith is central**.

Hope is wonderful, unsettling, joyful, frustrating. When we're at our wit's end it percolates through our anxiety; when we're tired it sidles around our weariness and nudges us onward; when we are frozen by fear it thaws our mind; when we are in darkest despair it lights a candle in a far away window.

Hope is one of the most powerful Christian realities. Hope is not wishful thinking, because hope demands a response. When life is challenging in our church, our country and our world; when life is challenging at home and at work; hope comes along and whispers, “Try this. Don’t give up. I am with you.” Hope is Jesus.

Paul’s Letter to the Romans, written towards the end of Paul’s life and ministry, can be viewed as a summary of what he learned of faith and hope and love through his own suffering and experience of life. Paul had suffered much and would again before his death a few years later in Rome. His ‘formula’ for hope describes what he learned from his pain – not that suffering is desirable or to be pursued, or to be wished on anyone, but that when pain comes, and it will, denial and avoidance are a ‘waste’. Life and health, hope, can come, even in the midst of suffering, out of our learning to endure and growing in character.ⁱ

Hope can be found and given even in the midst of pain and suffering. The work and witness of Mother Teresa, now a saint, in Calcutta, makes that clear. A former president of India said of her: “In our present-day troubled world, incessantly plagued by conflict and hatred, the life that is lived and the work that is carried out by people like Mother Teresa bring new hope for the future of mankind.” To live the kind of life she lived and to do the work she did demands endurance and character learned in living with pain and suffering, our own or that of others. It also demands and produces hope. Faith gives hope.

Hope is not something we work out, but rather something we take in. Hope does not disappoint because it comes from the Spirit of God. Our faith, our endurance and character, and God’s love, freely given, are the substance of hope.

Brexit and many other things in these last two years, has made our country angry and divided, but the anger and division predated that catastrophic vote. Today it is not only anger that we have to contend with, it is anxiety, which is sapping the life-blood of our nation, and also our church. Anxiety is a killer, and it is at work in our Church today. Mostly it has to do with what the future will hold. If we struggle to recognise the present, a present which to a lesser or greater

extent we have made ourselves, what will the future look like? What will survive? Will we survive? Or will it be changed for the worse?

A hurricane swept through the south east of England in 1987. In central London, Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens, like the rest of the park areas, looked like the end of the world. Roads were strewn with fallen trees. They'd crashed through roofs and cars. The great parks, with their formal avenues and gardens, were devastated. A few days later the park keepers started a bonfire to burn the branches and trunks that had blown down. There were so many, the fire lasted for two years. Ten years on a television documentary traced what had happened since. The groves and forests had all grown back. Those that were left to their own devices had fared even better than the ones that had been deliberately replanted. Nature recovers. So does humanity.ⁱⁱ

Change is not threatening so long as we keep firm hold of the values by and for which we live. We can travel with confidence so long as we have a map. We can jump with safety knowing there is someone to catch us as we fall. It is when we lose these things that change creates anxiety.

Michelle Obama has said, "You may not always have a comfortable life and you will not always be able to solve all of the world's problems at once but don't ever underestimate the importance you can have because history has shown us that courage can be contagious and hope can take on a life of its own."

Where is hope to be found? It is to be found in a living, wrestling, questioning faith. A faith that produces love, because it believes in hope. Hope does not disappoint, because it is the in-breathing of God's Spirit into our lives, yours and mine, that will not let us settle for what is not right, and what is not fair, and what is not good. This is the wisdom of God talked about in the Book of Proverbs.

In a world on fire with anger, fear and anxiety, the hope we have *in* God and *from* God strengthens us, and prepares us for what is to come next. God's hope does not disappoint, and we will go on, in hope.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Richard L Sheffield, Feasting on the Word Year C vol 3 p41

ⁱⁱ Jonathan Sacks, Celebrating Life, pps 185-6