

HOPE: A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

**Presentation by Brendan McAllister at
the Gathering in Glasgow on Conflict and Faith,
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*“For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”
Pilate asked him: what is truth?”
(John 18: 37 – 38)*

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

Hopelessness.

During the years when I was working in mediation in Northern Ireland, there were regular visitors from conflict zones from around the world, sometimes individuals on their own intrepid pilgrimages; sometimes delegations sent by governments or philanthropic donors.

One such group consisted of Israeli and Palestinian political leaders. I was asked to go down and meet them in Dublin. I got lost and arrived at their hotel late and flustered. I was met at the door by one of the Dublin hosts. He told me three important things before I went in.

First, that the Israelis had killed a Palestinian leader the previous week and so the Palestinians in this group would not sit in the same room as their Israeli counterparts.

Second, that I would therefore have to do my session twice.

Third, the group's meeting with the Irish Foreign Minister had been brought forward by an hour. So, I would have ten minutes with each group.

It was early in the morning. As I opened my notes I watched the Israeli politicians slowly file into the room. A number of them looked a bit hung-over and miserable. I suspected that by now they were flooded with meetings. I wondered how, on earth, I could make a meaningful impression on these men.

In a flush of inspiration, I stood up and said:

'Good Morning gentlemen. It is good to have an opportunity to meet you. I have been following your situation for over 30 years and observing it closely. And I have to tell you that, in my professional opinion, your situation is hopeless.'

Then I sat down.

The room was very quiet. The politicians were wide awake now and staring at me. I waited a moment, then stood up and said:

'But what is our work if it is not to give hope in hopeless situations?'

I do remember that after the ten minutes one of them invited me to visit Israel. Somehow, I had made an impact on him, though I have to say that I'm still waiting on his call.

Today, as I look around this room, only a few of you look hung-over but I know, I just know, that, like me, many of you are struggling with the hopelessness that seems to pervade our world in these times.

Of course, the world has known many, many hopeless times.

Hope.

On 19 November, 1979, ten years before he would lead the so-called velvet revolution that would sweep the Communist regime from power, the Czech playwright and dissident, Vaclav Havel, sat down in his prison cell and wrote a letter to his wife, Olga. Though not a religious man, these were his words:

“Hope is a dimension of the spirit.
It is not outside us, but within us.
When you lose it, you must seek it again
within yourself
And in people around you –
not in objects or even in events.”

Nearly two thousand years earlier, St. Paul wrote his letter to the Colossians and said:

“You must, of course, continue faithful on a sure and firm foundation, and not allow yourselves to be shaken from the hope you gained when you heard the gospel which has been preached to everybody in the world.”

One of the great spiritual writers of the twentieth century, Thomas Merton, contemplated the terrible state of the world in his book, ‘Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander’, and wrote:

“There is the hope, there is the world that remakes itself at God’s command without consulting us.”

Hopelessness gives way to hope through creativity.

And what is the source of creativity?

I think that the source of creativity, is spirituality.

But what is spirituality?

Spirituality.

“Spirituality is the awakening of mind and heart to the grasp of the Spirit.” Pascaline Coff.

“It is what we are. It is being led by the Spirit of God. It is when we are led from the inside by the Spirit, not by external stimuli.”

Adolfo Nicolas SJ

“In Islam everything is ‘spiritual’ because all actions must be in accordance with God’s pleasure. There is constant awareness, mindfulness and consciousness of God in everything that the Muslim says or does.” “One Reason” website

“Spirituality is a sense that there is more than what is obvious or visible; it is ‘a sense of the more’. It is a sense of interiority.”

B McAllister.

Q 1. Share a personal reflection on spirituality.

The spirituality of conflict.

We do tend to think of spiritual experiences as heart-warming; special and positive.

We are used to hearing about ‘the spirituality of peace’.

But what about the spirituality of conflict?

What effect does violence or violation have on a person’s spirituality?

In his book, "Night", written as a young survivor of the Holocaust, Elie Wiesel told how, as a teenager, he was forced to witness the execution of a ten year old boy in Auschwitz, hanged by the SS in front of the assembled prisoner population. In the weeks that followed, Wiesel struggled "to accept God's silence" and recalled that in the depths of his heart, he "felt a great void."

We should think about how violence affects our spirituality.

The American poet, Samuel Menashe, was a US infantryman in World War Two. He fought in the Battle of the Bulge, in the Ardennes, in 1944. Out of a company of 190 men, he was one of only six who had not been killed, wounded or taken prisoner by the war's end. When he died in 2011, an obituary in the Irish Times observed that he was viewed as

"a poet who expressed joy in the here and now. "This was perhaps informed by his experience of war. He once remarked on his return that he couldn't understand how people could make plans: "I was amazed that they could talk of the future, next summer. As a result of the war, each day was the last day. And then it changed. Each day was the only day."

Q 2. How has violence, conflict, violation, struggle or adversity affected your spirituality?

Roland Rolheiser, describes spirituality as 'the holy longing'.

"It is no easy task to walk this earth and find peace. Inside of us, it would seem, something is at odds with the very rhythm of things and we are forever restless, dissatisfied, frustrated, aching. We are so over-charged with desire that it is hard to come to simple rest. Desire is always stronger than satisfaction."

Rolheiser asserts that our efforts to address this inner restlessness, our efforts to address our 'dis-ease', are at the heart of spirituality. He views spirituality as the effort each person makes to engage with the 'holy longing' that is basic to the condition of being human. Spirituality is situated in the gap between desire and satisfaction.

Depending on our response to that inner dis-ease, our spirituality can be good or bad.

Thomas Merton.

According to Thomas Merton,

"a life is either all spiritual or not spiritual at all. No person can serve two masters. Your life is shaped by the end you live for. You are made in the image of what you desire."

And let me quote now from the Thomas Merton Encyclopedia.

Merton affirmed Christianity as pre-eminently, *'a religion of hope', "founded on the belief that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God and that divine mercy and goodness are more powerful than human evil."*

"Hope puts its trust in the power of love more than in law, in freedom more than in structures, in people more than in institutions, in the mystery of grace rather than in a cult of success and visible results."

Again, from the Merton encyclopedia:

"Authentic hope develops not by avoiding the darkness and apparent emptiness of life but by entering into the depths of human suffering and discovering life and meaning where from the outside an observer sees only death and absurdity."

“Hope is valid only when it confronts darkness, desperation and ignorance and overcomes them in Christ.”

Reflecting on insights from his spiritual life as a contemplative, Merton describes the Christian message of hope as an assurance

“that, whether you understand it or not, God loves you, is present to you, lives in you, dwells in you, calls you, saves you, and offers you an understanding and light which are like nothing you ever found in books or heard in sermons”, an experience of “the intimate union in the depths of your own heart, of God’s spirit in your own secret inmost self, so that you and He are in all truth, One Spirit.”

Merton says that,

“the basis of Christian hope “is God’s love and acceptance as revealed in the cross of Christ and in the new life bestowed by “the great feast of Christian hope: the Resurrection.”

In this regard, says Merton, ‘hope demands resistance to all the forces that deny authentic human dignity and destiny.’

Alban McCoy writes that

“hope is rooted in God alone and it gives rise to a confidence that the whole of our lives and the whole of creation is encompassed by and taken up into an inconceivable and infinite Love.

“The virtue of hope”, says McCoy, “is a gift of God’s grace, not the product of the human will. “Hope is the hallmark of a new life now. To believe in God is to hope, and hope sets us free to love, and love overcomes everything.”

Faith.

In St. Paul's letter to the Romans, he wrote about Abraham's call from God in these terms:

"... the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through faith."

Abraham's calling, from which, incidentally, Christianity and Islam are descended, was not based on the law, the observance of rules, but on faith.

Let me reflect on this from a personal perspective for a moment.

- In February, 2016: parish bulletin notice.
- Discernment year – then decide.
- Four fronts: marriage; the state of the Church; doctrine; faith.
- Glenvale convent: John's gospel: you did not choose me; I chose you.
- Trust the call.
- Feeling at home.
- From seeker to message bearer.
- From cultural Catholic to confessional Catholic.

- Faith-based hope.

- Pastoral v Strategic.

- Jesus was a strategist: sending disciples ahead of him; choosing apostles; associating with women.

- RUC 1992: – not impulsive but calculated: not training but dialogue: recruits; trainers; operational cops; commanders; leadership.

- Argument with police over their sense of mission: we just wanted to be cops.

- Tim Lewis: trust in their equipment.
- What is our equipment? The Good News; the energy of the Word; the energy of prayer; the liberation of faith; patient endurance; a belief in truth.
- The Good News: not just the life of Jesus; not just his crucifixion but also his resurrection.
- South Sudan retreat.
- Newman on faith.
- Merton on Barth.
- Truth: reaching into the spirit.
- St. Benedict.

END.

