

Ecological Hope in Crisis?

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Christian hope in our context

The church has frequently had to think afresh about Christian hope in changing contexts. It's not that the essence of Christian hope – the great hope, founded on Jesus Christ, for God's redemptive and fulfilling renewal of all his creation - changes. But if Christian hope is to retain its power to be the engine of the church's engagement with the world, if it is to be more than an ineffective private dream, hope itself needs renewal as the world changes. From the infinite riches of God's future for the world we must draw those that can be transformative for our time. That way we can re-envision the world in the light of hope. That is what happened when John the prophet, in the book of Revelation, was taken up to heaven in order to see how the critical moment of history in which his first readers were living looked from God's perspective - from the perspective of God's purpose to actualize his kingdom on earth as it already is in heaven. John had to be abstracted in vision from the world of the beast, the world as projected by the imperial propaganda, in order, not simply to see the future goal of God's purposes, but also to see how that goal shed light on the present, how God's people there and then were to live towards the coming kingdom of God and the coming renewal of all creation. A great deal of misunderstanding of Revelation arises from missing the fact that it contextualizes the Christian hope in the realities of the late first-century Roman Empire. It inspires and models the kind of contextualizing we need to do, but it cannot do that for us. We need, if not the revelatory vision with which John was privileged, at least the discernment of Christian wisdom to read the world aright in the light of the Christian

hope and to enable us here and how to live towards the new creation.

Part of that contextualizing of Christian hope has to be engagement of some kind with the secular hopes of our time. The book of Revelation engages with Rome's pretensions to universal and eternal rule. In our own time we are still living amid the fading glory of modern progressivism, that pervasive ideology of the modern world that seduced everyone into thinking that tomorrow will – or at, least, should – be better than today. Its major surviving versions are economic globalization, with its myth of never-ending economic growth, and technological optimism, with its ignorant confidence that human ingenuity will solve all our problems and put us back on track, still headed for the technological utopia in which nature will be finally mastered, all its unruly potential harnessed to our needs and desires. Both economic growth and technological optimism – natural allies, of course – are versions of the delusion that there are no limits to what we can have and do. The dawning ecological catastrophe should surely have dispelled those dreams, but such is the power of progressivism, especially in the USA, that they live on. Climate change denial is one version of their delusive power.

Another feature of the contemporary context of Christian hope – if I may use 'contemporary' to mean the last three or four decades – is that for the first time in human history humans themselves have acquired the power to annihilate human life and much of the rest of creation on this planet. Humans in the past have often faced the prospect – real or imagined – of world-destroying catastrophe. And many civilizations have collapsed

through over-exploitation of their natural resources, as Jared Diamond's book *Collapse* demonstrated so compellingly. But only with the development of nuclear weapons capable of annihilating the human world did humans face the prospect of an entirely human-caused (anthropogenic) terminal catastrophe. In the period of the Cold War it hung like a sword of Damocles over all our lives. We have displaced that threat for the time being, though it will never go away. The ecological catastrophe that is now underway is much more complex in its causes and challenges, as well as in its foreseeable results. Moreover, while the nuclear threat, since Nagasaki and Hiroshima, has remained no more than a threat, ecological catastrophe is under way. It is engulfing us. Although, like nuclear bombs, it was created by humans, we have now, like the sorcerer's apprentice, lost control of it. It has its own momentum, which, even if humans stopped all carbon emissions worldwide tomorrow (an impossible hope), would still keep going, with some foreseeable consequences that are very alarming and doubtless others we cannot guess. If there is, for concerned Christians, a crisis of hope, I guess that is the main factor. All the books that have taught us that care of creation is a Christian responsibility, that there are all sorts of things we can do – from recycling to lobbying at climate change summits – all seemed to assume we had time to stop anything really bad happening. They exuded hope of a fairly uncomplicated kind. Now we are realising that, although, of course, we can stop things getting even worse than they will anyway, quite a lot is going wrong unstoppably. And if we haven't managed to stop what is happening – and if neither the politicians in power in China and the USA nor the Christians in the pews are taking the situation seriously – how can we go on hoping?

Ultimate hope and proximate hopes

The relation between ultimate hope and proximate hopes is crucial to our topic. By ultimate hope I mean the final achievement of all God's purposes for his creation when he brings this temporal history to its end and takes the whole creation, redeemed and renewed, into his own eternal life. If we believe in the God of Jesus Christ, that is an unconditional hope that rests on God's faithfulness to his creation and the promise made in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Christians have by no means always thought that this hope includes the non-human creation, but happily we have been recovering that full hope. The new heaven and the new earth are not a replacement for this creation, but its renewal, when God will take it beyond the reach of evil, death and transience. Not only is that clear in Romans 8:19-21, for example, but also it is coherent with our own destiny as resurrection to renewed bodily life. Our bodies are our solidarity with the rest of creation. We are Adam's children, earthy, made of the stuff of this earth like the mammals, the birds, the clouds, the rivers and all the creatures of this earth. And so is Jesus Christ, who by rising bodily from death maintained his solidarity with all the creatures of earth through death into new creation.

In my view, we should think of God taking into his new creation the whole chronological extent of this creation's history, everything that has value for eternity. Extinct creatures and lost landscapes – all that God has found good in his creation - will be there. Nothing will be lost except evil and the damage it has done. Of course, we can't imagine it. Ultimate hope ought to be mind-blowing.

Proximate hopes are all the hopes we have for the temporal future. If they are fully formed Christian hopes, they, like ultimate hope, will be based on what God has done for us in Jesus Christ and on the images we are given of the

goal that God is going ultimately to realise for his world. Our proximate hopes are for what we can desire and envisage that reflects, within this world, the ultimate hope of new creation. They are on the way to ultimate hope, but must always, of course, fall short of it. It is very important in our contemporary context that we distinguish this vision from modern progressivism and modern utopianism. We are not engaged in a step-by-step progress towards utopia. What we are able to do in realising our hopes does not, as it were, accumulate, as though we were building the New Jerusalem brick by brick. Sometimes good follows good in a process of improvement, sometimes it doesn't. But the value is not dependent on progression. We have all been brainwashed by progressivism. For things to be worth doing and worth having they do not have to lead on to even better things. They have value in themselves, and nothing will be lost in the end. When Paul says that our labour will not be in vain (1 Cor 15:58) he does not mean that it will contribute to a historical process of improvement but that it will have effects that will be preserved in the new creation.

One key difference between ultimate hope and proximate hope is that ultimate hope is unconditional. It depends only God's transcendent act of re-creation. So Paul can call it 'a hope that does not disappoint' (Rom 5:5). But proximate hopes depend partly on what humans do. God's providence is constantly at work engaging with human evil, limiting its effects, bringing good out of it, but he does not abolish it in this world. This world will always be the ambiguous sphere in which evil can frustrate our most reasonable hopes. Proximate hopes can be disappointed. If you have been to Jerusalem, you have probably been to the modern church of Dominus Flevit on the Mount of Olives. It has a fine view over the whole of the old city of Jerusalem, and it is shaped like a tear because it commemorates

Jesus' tears of disappointment, when he lamented: 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem... How often I have desired to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were not willing' (Matt 23:37). There was nothing wrong or inadequate about Jesus' hopes for the people of Jerusalem. They flowed from his love for them, which was God's love for them. His hopes were disappointed because love can be rejected.

Getting the relationship between ultimate hope and proximate hopes right has been continually problematic for Christians in the modern period. On the one hand, modern progressivism merged the two in a vision of improvement that would issue in utopia. Utopia became a goal we might achieve – with the catastrophic results we saw in Stalin's Russia and Mao's China. Utopianism is dangerous partly because it cannot content itself with what is pragmatically possible in given circumstances. It over-reaches the real limits of the human situations in a massive effort to wrest history towards its utopian goals, usually involving violent suppression of dissent. When it comes to the non-human creation, modern utopianism was usually wedded to the technological exploitation of nature, with the sad ecological consequences we saw in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

On the other hand, in the modern period traditional Christianity has been accused of the opposite error: setting its hopes on an other-worldly goal in order to keep the masses happy with their unfortunate lot here and now. Hope for another world to compensate for the ills of this one incurred the Marxist critique of being opium of the people. I think the charge has been exaggerated, and we should not devalue the role that ultimate hope has played for people in hopeless circumstances, helping people to go on living when any hope for

improvement in this world was entirely unrealistic.

But how can ultimate hope and proximate hopes relate in a way that empowers hopeful activity without falling into the trap of unrealistic utopianism? I think we need to see it like this: Ultimate hope can fund proximate hopes. It enables us to work in the direction of God's purpose, knowing that we are working with God's purpose, working with the grain of the universe. But distinguishing ultimate hope and proximate hopes enables us to be appropriately modest and realistic about what we can hope for here and now in particular contexts. We have to seek out those concrete possibilities for movement in the direction of the kingdom that we can actually identify and work with here and now. We do not hold the tiller of history. We must simply do what we can, more or less, this or that, as the case may be.

Faith, hope and love

If we need to sustain, to refresh or to renew our hope I think one good approach is to reflect on the way it is connected with faith and love in that New Testament trio of Christian virtues that Paul expounds with poetic eloquence in 1 Corinthians 13. The three belong together. I am tempted to say that, like the persons of God the Trinity, they are perichoretic. In other words, they are formed through their mutual relations. Faith, hope and love are mutually engaging, mutually sustaining, mutually enhancing, each necessary to the flourishing of the others. Among other things he says about love, Paul says that it believes all things (faith) and it hopes all things (hope).

When Paul writes about faith, hope and love, he is, of course, speaking about Christian virtues, the work of the Holy Spirit in Christian lives, but it is important to note that there are, as it were, natural versions of each. Without faith, hope and love human beings

cannot live at all. Although it may be entirely below the level of conscious reflection, all human beings live by a kind of basic trust in reality. We assume that all the ordinary things we do will have the kind of effects they usually have. Hope is natural to human beings and necessary to human life, and similarly care and concern for others, even if only a select group, are indispensable to the life of the social animals we are. In all three of these natural virtues the individual is directed outwards, if not explicitly to God, at least to the world and to other humans. Sin is what impedes that positive, outward directedness of human life, and turns people in on themselves in despair and self-centredness.

What the Holy Spirit does is to renew and to revitalize these good aspects of what it is to be human in the world. Christian redemption is the renewal of human nature, not its replacement. What the Spirit especially does is to re-source these virtues in God and to re-focus them on God as their primary object. We live not by some merely implicit trust in reality, vaguely defined, but by faith in the living God. We don't just hope for the best, as they say, but place our hope in God. We love because he first loved us and by loving God we learn to love all that God loves.

The fact that these Christian virtues are the renewal of natural virtues means that it should be natural and not problematic for Christians to work with non-Christian people who care about the planet and share many of our hopes and fears for it. We have Christian distinctives, important to us, but they need not cancel out what we have in common with others.

We shall now reflect briefly on each of the three virtues and the way it relates to the others.

LOVE: I take this first because Paul says that love is the greatest of the three. The reason may be partly that love is mutual between God and us. I know that preachers sometimes say that God has faith in us or that God is pinning his hopes on us. No doubt, that makes a point in its own way. But Scripture does not speak that way. In the Bible God does not have faith or hope, but God does love. God loves us and we return God's love. Moreover, this is not just a closed circle. It expands as we learn to love what God loves. We come to value other people in something of the way God does and we come to value the rest of creation in something of the way God does. This is not a case of loving only because God tells us to. It is a matter of really sharing in the movement of God's love that encompasses his whole creation and returns to him in reciprocal love. God's love for the rest of creation empowers ours.

Some time ago I was thinking about the first chapter of Genesis when I had one of those breakthrough moments when you see something significant in Scripture that you haven't noticed before, even though the passage is familiar. If you read through the creation narrative in Genesis 1, you read that at the end of each day God looks at what he has created on that day and sees that it is good. In other words, he is delighted with it. He appreciates its value. I think the narrative is inviting us to share God's delight in his creation. Whenever it says, 'God saw that it was good,' we are prompted to agree. Knowing the created world as we do, we can enter into God's appreciation of it. So when we get to the creation of humans late on the sixth day and we read God's command to us to have dominion over the creatures, we already know that what God is entrusting to our care is something of great value. It's the world we have begun to delight in as God does. We can only exercise dominion – that is caring responsibility for other creatures – if we have

learned to appreciate them, to love them as God does.

'Love hopes all things,' Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13:7. Love empowers hope. Actually, when we love, we simply can't help hoping. No one who loves their children can fail to have hopes for them. No one who loves the lovely products of human art and culture can fail to hope that they survive to inspire others for all time. No one who loves the wild places of the world can fail to hope that they will be preserved. No one who loves red squirrels or starlings or snow leopards or rare orchids or coral reefs or tigers can fail to hope that they survive in the habitats they belong to. No one who loves and appreciates the astounding diversity of life in every nook and cranny of this diverse world can fail to hope that it can be preserved and that even the species as yet unknown to us may live for the value they have in themselves. Love inspires hope and energizes hope.

FAITH: Faith is what makes Christian hope something much more than optimism about human capabilities. Faith means we do not expect to achieve what we hope for all by ourselves. It means we have to believe in providence.

Providence is a difficult doctrine, but I think essential. One way of putting it is this: God can make of what we do much more than we can make of it ourselves. What is actually happening when some human effort for the good is successful? Often it is not just a human person's act or a group of people's act gets the result, but a collocation of unplanned circumstances that accompany the act. In other circumstances it would not have been successful. Things had to come together in just the way they did. A great deal of human achievement depends on what a secular person would have to say is just coincidence. Maybe we think too much of ourselves to think too much

about that, but it doesn't undermine the importance of human achievement. What the human person is intentionally doing to get the result is essential, but it's not all that is going on. God honours what we do by making of it more than we can make of it ourselves.

An interesting biblical illustration of this is the story of the book of Esther. This a book that never mentions God. It's rather extraordinary that the Bible contains a book that never mentions God. There is one point in the text where we really can't help thinking of God: when Mordecai says to queen Esther, 'Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this?' (4:14). But even here the writer scrupulously does no more than suggest that God may be at work behind the scenes. Why this curious absence of God from this narrative of a great deliverance of God's people from threatened genocide? In some ways, the story of Esther is a new exodus narrative, with Esther as the new Moses. But in the original Exodus narrative God is very explicitly present – in manifest and miraculous power. I think the author of Esther thought, as we are also inclined to think when we read of the pillar of fire and cloud and the parting of the Red Sea, that God doesn't seem to do that sort of thing nowadays. So is God not at work in this apparently secular world? Well, Esther does the right and rather courageous thing, and it works – but only because other events, coincidences, conspire to ensure its success. This is the anonymous work of God in a world where he is not evident in manifest interventions. He takes what Esther so resourcefully and courageously does, and he makes more of it than she could have made of it herself.

Faith is another form of protection from hubris and utopianism. What we can do is important but we must let God make of it what he will.

HOPE: 'Love,' says Paul, 'hopes all things' (1 Cor 13:7). Love, as we have seen, is what empowers and energizes hope, but 'for all things'? Of course, this is elevated poetic style. It surely doesn't endorse indulging utterly fanciful fantasies of hope. But it raises the issue of hope and realism, which I think is near the heart of our concerns in the crisis of ecological hope.

The first point to make is that proximate hopes must be moderated and directed by realism about the real possibilities of the here and now. Let climate change denial be a warning to us. People who deny climate change are devoted to the American dream of limitless economic growth. They see all the evidence for climate change as a kind of left-wing conspiracy to imperil America's great future. They refuse to face reality because they cannot surrender their very unrealistic hope.

I have learned quite a lot from Bill McKibben's most recent book, *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet* (New York: St Martin's Griffin, 2010; with new Afterword, 2011). He spells Eaarth with an extra 'a' in it, because, he says, we need a new name for a planet that climate change has already made a different world from the one that humans have lived in for the rest of human history. He writes to address precisely the situation that poses for us the question, 'How can we go on hoping?': the situation in which climate change is not only already under way, but actually has its own momentum that is now unstoppable. We can limit the damage if we act soon, but a lot of damage is inevitable, especially because climate change is bound to trigger other processes, like the release of the vast quantities of methane under the arctic tundra. We are already living in a different and tougher world, and it is bound to get tougher.

But McKibben insists that this is not an excuse to give up. Rather, we need the opposite: increased engagement. We must keep up the fight to prevent climate change getting even more out of control, but also ‘we need now to understand the world we’ve created, and consider – urgently – how to live in it. We can’t simply keep stacking boulders against the change that’s coming on every front: we need to figure out what parts of our lives and our ideologies we must abandon so that we can protect the core of our societies and civilizations’ (p. xiv). (I would want to add: so that we can protect what we can of the rest of creation too.) This doesn’t mean giving up hope, but it requires being mature and realistic about where we have got to and need to be going. ‘Maturity is not the opposite of hope; it’s what makes hope possible’ (p. xiv).

What, he argues, we must do has a lot in common with what the Transition movement is envisaging and working towards. It means scaling down. It means getting more local than global. In comparison with modern so-called progress and its dreams of limitless growth of many kinds, it means decline. We will need, he says, ‘to focus not on growth but on maintenance, on a controlled decline from the perilous heights to which we’ve climbed’ (p. 204). If we are wise, we need not experience the sort of collapse that Jared Diamond’s book documents for societies of the past. We can decline, McKibben says, ‘lightly, carefully, gracefully.’ And it will bring some benefits of its own, such as the recovery of local community.

But then, what is the role of hope in such a scenario? I would suggest that hope’s role will be to be discerning and imaginative. Discernment is partly about seeking out, spotting and choosing the real possibilities for hope. Remember that hope is empowered by love and remember also the old saying that love will find a way. The truth in the saying is that

love may see what merely dispassionate surveys and calculations may miss. Love may be undeterred by the false realism that pours cold water on all our hopes. Love may find the real possibilities for hope – not unrealistic ones, but the ones that need some spotting and some work.

Another Old Testament story can make my point: David and Goliath (1 Samuel 17). Of all the unlikely things, the shepherd boy with his sling and his five stones from the brook brings down the giant no one else dares to confront. He refuses Saul’s offer of weapons and armour, which would only weigh him down. He just uses his sling and it proves to be precisely the way Goliath can be defeated. With a sling David is able to attack before he comes within range of Goliath’s weapons, and with it he reaches the one exposed bit of Goliath’s body: his forehead. So David’s remarkable success is not a miracle in the ordinary sense. What is remarkable is that David did just the thing that was needed but that no one else thought of doing. David, confident that God is with him, does the only thing he knows how to do and the one thing likely to succeed. That’s what discerning real possibilities for hope might be like.

Hope should be discerning and it can also be imaginative. I don’t mean fantasising. Imagination has a much more serious role in human thinking than that. It opens up real possibilities. It suggests how we might do something quite differently. Giving up modern progressivism doesn’t mean giving up human ingenuity and inventiveness. It doesn’t mean giving up technology but adopting and developing appropriate technology. Not the big technological dreams for getting nature back under control. They are just moving on in the same direction that got us here in the fix we’re in. We need technologies that suit our properly human place within a creation for which we should care, not enslave.

There are a lot of other things to think about. What are the priorities for conserving the non-human creatures when we cannot do everything? How can we scale down to a more localised life without abandoning global relationships and responsibilities in a world where the poorer countries are going to suffer most from what the rich nations have caused, and in a world where there are going to be climate refugees on a scale it is not easy to imagine the world coping with. And among all the manifold good things that we all busy ourselves with, what is really going to matter most? Must we focus more and prioritize?

In conclusion: In a situation of disappointed and uncertain hope, it is the virtuous trio of faith, hope and love that must keep us going. In the New Testament faith and hope are often linked with endurance. We may need to be prepared for a lot of just keeping going, sticking it out, not giving up when it would be easy to. But faith, hope and love, working, of course, with all the resources of knowledge and expertise that we can muster, must also lead us into new visions of the possible even within a sorely damaged world.



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