The Power of Hope

Rob Yule, 2000

The Power of Hope - A Better Day Coming

Rob Yule, minister of St Albans Presbyterian Church, Palmerston North, is Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Aoteoroa New Zealand for 2000-2002. His opening message to the Presbyterian General Assembly, given at his installation in Knox Church, Dunedin, on 30 September 2000, dealt with the potential of hope to motivate people in times of adversity and inspire social transformation in situations that seem humanly hopeless.

Future and Hope - A Review of the Literature on Eschatology

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A Better Day Coming

(Isaiah 2:1-5)

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I could begin this address in one of two ways. As a good Presbyterian, theologically trained, I could start with a book of theology. In 1968, my final year as a student at the Theological Hall, Knox College, Dunedin, I reviewed German theologian Jürgen Moltmann's epoch-making *The Theology of Hope*. Moltmann's book redressed decades of neglect of the Christian hope by academic theologians. Interacting with East German Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch's 3 volume work, *The Hope Principle*, Moltmann drew attention to the power of hope to motivate people and energise social transformation in times of suffering and difficulty.

Or I could begin, in a postmodern manner, with a story. We have just sold our 1979 Holden Kingswood station wagon. It took our family the length of New Zealand on many memorable holidays, towing a caravan, sporting an aerofoil with the words, 'Jesus is Coming', in gold letters matching the colour of the car. It drew a lot of responses, including gestures I won't repeat here. My friend, the late John Brook, once said, 'Rob. It's a rather hard act to follow.' The best reaction we ever got was that of a quick-witted hitchhiker, who seeing us approaching, made the sign of the cross!

As with the film 'Run Lola, Run', you can choose your own opening to this sermon. The theme of hope has long preoccupied me. At the beginning of this Assembly I want to share something of what the Bible shows us about the transforming nature of hope. For hope - a seemingly insubstantial and fragile quality - has the remarkable power to transform situations that seem hopeless and motivate people who have their backs to the wall.

Hope is Realistic

Hope is not hype. Hope faces difficulties honestly. Christian hope is based on God's promises and their fulfilment. God's promises do not correspond to reality as we find it. Rather they contradict our present experience. They awaken what the Bible calls 'hoping against hope' (Romans 4:18). The fact that God's promises contradict present reality puts us in a state of tension until the time of fulfilment comes (Romans 8:18-25). As believers 'We walk by faith, not by sight' (2 Corinthians 5:7) (Moltmann, *op. cit*., pp. 15-36, 102-6).

Hope is born of desperation. Difficulties are the forge of hope. Think of the Israelite slaves crying out to God in Egypt for deliverance from their burden. Or the Israelite tribes suffering under the marauding raids of the Midianites in the days of Gideon. Or the Jewish exiles weeping by the rivers of Babylon, enduring taunts to sing the Lord's song in a strange land. Hope is born out of adversity. When we prosper we tend to forget God. When things go badly we cry out to God.

One of the things I often find myself crying out to God about is the secularity of our culture. We live in possibly the most secular society on earth. I used to think that description applied to Australia, land of the sunburnt soul. But Australia is much less hung up about giving public recognition to religious faith than New Zealand.

In Australia's Millennium celebrations pride of place was given to the waterfall of fireworks that illuminated the Sydney Harbour Bridge, with the single handwritten word 'Eternity' as its centrepiece. In the mid thirties a homeless Sydney tramp heard an evangelist say, 'Eternity, eternity, I wish that I could shout that word to everyone on the streets of Sydney.' This illiterate alcoholic who, in his own words, 'couldn't have spelt eternity for a hundred quid', went out from that meeting, took a stick of chalk out of his pocket, and wrote the word 'Eternity' on the footpath. It was the first of thousands of times that the word 'Eternity' would appear on Sydney's footpaths, walls, and doorways, before it was discovered who was doing it.

Australia's Millennium celebrations immortalised Arthur Stace, the homeless vagrant who evangelised Sydney in chalk for thirty years. But New Zealand couldn't even agree to have Handel's 'Messiah' in the public Millennium celebration in the Auckland Domain.

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New Zealand could be the most secular country on the planet. It's not that many churches here are not vigorous. Grassroots Christianity is alive and well. But faith in God is marginalised, systematically excluded from public acknowledgment, pushed to the margins of our society. There has been a lot of talk in Pentecostal and charismatic circles about 'taking the land for God.' In fact, year by year our culture grows more and more secular, and Christian faith and values are increasingly excluded from public life.

I feel for churches that are small and struggling - such as in provincial areas where the population is declining. My heart goes out to discouraged leaders and struggling congregations, seeking faithfully against considerable odds to keep the faith and bear witness to God. Their cry is that of the exiles in Babylon, 'How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?' (Psalm 137:4).

During a difficult time in the early years of my ministry in Christchurch, as an inexperienced minister with a congregation that was being torn apart by a church split, it was desperation that drew me to pray with intense longing for God's kingdom to come. From time to time I used to go and pray in Christchurch's splendid Catholic Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament.

Two features of the building stirred me. One was the Latin text above the entrance: 'Behold, the dwelling of God is with people' (Revelation 21:3) The other was the freshly renovated interior, swept clean of religious clutter by the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council, devoid of symbols except for a splendid contemporary bishop's chair placed prominently in the chancel behind the altar - ready, it seemed, to welcome the returning Lord.

The numinous text and the empty chair combined with my anguish to produce in me a great longing for Christ and his kingdom to come. God answered those prayers through an experience of the Holy Spirit which transformed my ministry and my thinking about the future. Like a computer chip inserted in my brain, whole tracts of the Bible dealing with the Christian hope lit up for me. God was showing me what he was doing to prepare the world for the return of Jesus.

I began to notice that many biblical prophecies refer to God's ongoing purposes for this earth, including a triumphant progress of the gospel throughout the world, a return of Jews to their land and their Lord, and a time when Jerusalem would again be the focus of God's purposes on earth. My hope was literally reborn in a time of adversity.

Hope is Optimistic

Hope not only faces difficult situations. It is also optimistic: it believes that genuine change is possible.

Hope means that our future as believers does not have to develop from what is presently possible, but from what is possible for God (Moltmann, *op. cit.*, p. 103). Christian hope is essentially creative; it believes and expects new things. We believe in a God who says 'Behold, I make all things new' (Revelation 21:5), a God 'with whom all things are possible' (Matthew 19:26), a God who 'gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist' (Romans 4:17). Hope is optimistic in the best sense. It opens us to genuinely new realities and experiences, revealing new possibilities for us who believe, delivering us from despair, and freeing us for loving service and hope-filled mission in society (Moltmann, *op. cit.*, pp. 32-6, 304-38).

There are many historical examples of hope. As Ian Murray points out in *The Puritan Hope*, the modern Protestant missionary movement was born at the end of the eighteenth century from the biblical hope of a coming age when the whole earth would be 'full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea' (Isaiah 11:9, Habakkuk 2:14). Our Presbyterian movement was in the forefront of that hope, establishing mission outposts, churches, schools and hospitals in places like India, China, Korea and central Africa.

The Zionist movement was born in the 1880s of such a hope. The early Zionists, mainly poor Jews from the Pale of Settlement in western Russia and the Ukraine, believed and acted upon the biblical prophecies about the restoration of Israel in the latter days. The earliest Zionist group, the Bilu, took their name from the initial Hebrew letters of the words of Isaiah's prophecy, 'House of Jacob, let us walk [in the light of the Lord]' (Isaiah 2:5). They established the first settlement of modern Israel, on the coastal plain near Jaffa, and called it Rishon L'Zion, 'First to Zion'. They endured hardships and sickness in the malaria-infested coastal swamps of Palestine, then an

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undeveloped backwater of the ailing Ottoman Empire. One hundred and twenty years later, look at their achievements.

My third example is the fall of Communism. Communism in the Soviet Bloc was shored up by the most oppressive state security apparatus the world has ever known, dedicated to eliminating the church and establishing an atheist society. Christians, from humble peasants to educated bishops, died in their millions under Lenin and Stalin, and were still being imprisoned under Brezhnev in the early eighties. Hope against hope sustained the heroic Christian opposition to Communism, and triggered the popular revolution that brought down the Berlin Wall, with hardly a shot being fired. The pen is mightier than the sword, and the prophet even mightier than the pen.

Time does not permit to tell of Alexander Solzhenitsyn, writing in lonely exile in Kol Terek, Kazakhstan, of Nelson Mandela, leading the opposition to apartheid in South Africa from his prison on Robben Island, or of the role of the Catholic Church in bringing down the Marcos regime in the Philippines. Hope is optimistic. In face of overwhelming odds, it believes that change is possible.

Hope is Futuristic

But hope is not just optimistic. It is above all futuristic. It believes in the future, in a better day coming. Biblical scholarship tends to be uncomfortable with this aspect of the Bible. Yet predictive prophecy, prophecy orientated to the future, as J. Barton Payne shows in his *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy*, occupies over one quarter of the Bible.

As a child I loved the biblical prophecies of a coming age of universal peace on earth. I continue to be stirred by their glorious vision of the nations going up to Jerusalem in the latter days to learn the ways of the Lord, of weapons of destruction being made into agricultural machinery, of war being studied no more, of animals and humans living in harmony, of the desert blossoming like the rose, of the whole earth being full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea (Isaiah 2:1-5, 11:1-9, 35:1-10, 65:17-25, Micah 4:1-3, Habakkuk 2:14).

These and other passages were quickened to me by the experience of the Holy Spirit I mentioned earlier. Jesus told us that the Holy Spirit would show us ‘things to come’ (John 16:13). The Spirit did just that for me, revolutionising my faith, my theology, my outlook, making me future-orientated rather than tradition-dependent, giving me, as the Bible puts it, ‘a future and a hope’ (Jeremiah 29:11).

‘Aah have a dream!’ said Martin Luther King in his famous 1963 speech at the Lincoln Memorial, galvanising the Civil Rights Movement with his biblical oratory. The Biblical prophets tell us we can all dream dreams and see visions. Joel’s prophecy says that God’s Spirit will cause even old men, who are past dreaming, to dream dreams (Joel 2:28).

Church, it’s time we dreamed again - of a better day coming, when God’s will is done on earth, as it is in heaven.

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A Review of Literature on Eschatology

with special reference to Jürgen Moltmann's Theology of Hope

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In his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) Immanuel Kant stated, 'The whole interest of reason, speculative as well as practical, is centred in the three following questions: (1) What can I know? (2) What ought I to do? (3) What may I hope?' Philosophy and theology since Kant have mainly been preoccupied with the first, the epistemological question, and to a lesser extent with the second, the ethical question. Schleiermacher attempted to avoid the force of the epistemological question for Christian theology by assigning faith to an independent and irreducible element of human experience that he termed 'feeling'. Ritschl, in response to the second question, interpreted religious statements as judgements of moral value. But the third question, prejudiced maybe by the notion of the immortality of the soul which was the answer that Kant formulated to it, has since then been almost completely ignored in modern theology, with the notable exception of some German Lutherans. Faith and love have received abundant attention, but hope has almost dropped out of the trinity of classic Christian virtues.

Transcendental Eschatologies

Certainly, there has been a renaissance of eschatology in Biblical studies since Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer recognised that the apocalyptic passages in the Gospels are the distinctive legacy of the historical Jesus, whom they viewed as a somewhat imbalanced apocalyptic enthusiast. But these discussions have been confined mainly to technical questions of Biblical interpretation, such as the alleged delay of the parousia, the nature of the resurrection body, the Biblical conception of time, the 'Son of Man' sayings in the Gospels, and the relationship of present fulfilment and future expectation in Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom of God. However valuable these studies have been in points of detail, they have not really yielded answers to Kant's third question, 'What may I hope?', but only to the historical question, 'What did Jesus or the early church hope?' They have not addressed the hermeneutical question of how to move beyond what the Biblical text *meant* to what it *means*.

The eschatological views of Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, and Paul Tillich are defective in many respects, but these modern theologians deserve credit at least for attempting to make Biblical eschatology relevant for human self-understanding and a central concern of theology in our time. In 1921 Barth made the programmatic announcement: 'If Christianity be not altogether and unreservedly eschatology, there remains in it no relationship whatever to Christ.' When we analyse the language of Barth's theology, however, it soon becomes apparent that the Christian hope has undergone a major transformation. 'The end of history,' he writes in his early study of the resurrection, 'must be . . . synonymous with the pre-history, the limits of time . . . must be the limits of all and every time and thus necessarily the *origin* of time.' Here, in what is little more than a tautology, 'end' becomes the equivalent of 'origin' and the *eschaton* becomes the transcendental boundary of time and eternity.

Even the mature Barth, when he comes to his definitive discussion of the goal of human life in the section on 'Ending Time' in the *Church Dogmatics*, concludes that the New Testament hope is not 'the continuation into an indefinite future of a somewhat altered life', but 'the "eternalising" (*Verewigung*) of this ending life.' 'Man as such,' he states emphatically, 'has no beyond': he 'belongs to this world', and is thus 'finite and mortal'. 'One day he will only have been, as once he was not.' The later Barth has a reputation for being more respectful of traditional theology than the early, but the conclusion we are driven to after studying the highly ambiguous language of this section is that he does not believe in a hereafter, that human life is bounded by death, and that human beings have only this mortal life to live. Contrary to St. Paul, it appears that Barth's hope in Christ is 'for this life only' (1 Corinthians 15:19).

Bultmann and Tillich also transpose the Bible's future hope into the transcendental openness of Existentialism. For Bultmann, God is the God of 'constant futurity', the 'ever coming God.' But like Godot in Samuel Beckett's

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play, he never comes. God's coming as envisaged by Bultmann is a purely transcendental 'coming' that evokes 'faith as openness to the future.' The dimension of the temporal future is so minimised by Bultmann that in his 1955 Gifford Lectures *History and Eschatology*, subtitled *The Presence of Eternity*, he can identify the end or *eschaton* with the moment of existential decision: 'every instant has the possibility of being an eschatological instant.' Similarly, though more portentously, Paul Tillich can say, 'The fulfilment of history lies in the permanently present end of history, which is the transcendental side of the Kingdom of God: the Eternal Life.' Past and future meet in the present, and both are included in the eternal 'now'.

Thus, whatever their differences, the three leading theologians of the first half of the twentieth century share the same secularist premise, that human beings have just one life to live - and that it is this present, finite, earth-bound one. With that common presupposition, their treatment of eschatology ceases to be the expectation of the believer's *future* in Jesus Christ, and becomes instead the transmutation of Christian hope into what Georg Picht has termed the 'epiphany of the eternal present of being.' Faced with such a widespread denial of future expectation by the leading theologians in our time, it is therefore refreshing to encounter Jürgen Moltmann's seminal book *Theology of Hope*, which unashamedly calls for a recovery of the dimension of futurity, and for a reconsideration of the great themes of theology in the light of hope.

Futurist Eschatology

Moltmann is perhaps the leading figure among a group of younger theologians, including Wolfhart Pannenburg, Walter Zimmerli, Gerhard Sauter and Ulrich Hedinger (in Germany) and Dietrich Ritschl (in the United States) who are determined to relate the thorough-going eschatology of the Bible to the experience of contemporary human beings living in a time of rapid social change. One of their chief partners in this concern has been the eighty-two year old Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch, author of the as yet untranslated two volume work *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (1959).

In contrast to the Existentialist philosophers with their understanding of the human condition as bounded by death, Bloch emphasises futurity and possibility, the creative orientation of human life towards a 'still unpossessed homeland'. Bloch does not accept the transcendent God of Judaeo-Christian faith, although he acknowledges that 'man is indebted to the Bible for his eschatological consciousness'. As a Marxist he advocates, in Moltmann's words, 'hope without faith', 'humanism without God.' Nevertheless, Moltmann is one of a number of Christian theologians who have been inspired by their interaction with Bloch to develop an eschatology that is true to our historical experience, genuinely creative, and open to the future.

Moltmann is refreshingly explicit about the Christocentric character of Christian eschatology, in distinction to abstract ideologies. 'Christian eschatology does not speak of a future as such. . . . Christian eschatology speaks of Jesus Christ and *his* future. . . . Hence the question whether all statements about the future are grounded in the person and history of Jesus Christ provides it with the touchstone by which to distinguish the spirit of eschatology from that of utopia.' (p. 17). He sees the resurrection of Jesus as the anchor of hope in history, the bridge between the universal hope of Jewish prophecy and apocalyptic and the eschatological mission of the church in world history.

Christian eschatology is based on the history of God's promises and their fulfilment. God's promise does not correspond to reality as we find it. Rather it contradicts present experience, and awakens 'hoping against hope' (Romans 4:18). It evokes the believing hope that, as Calvin puts it in his commentary on Hebrews 11:1, 'hastens beyond this world through the midst of the darkness' of suffering, guilt and death to a future in which these ambiguities will be resolved (pp. 15-36, 102-6). The very fact that God's promise contradicts present reality puts the believer in a state of tension until the time of fulfilment comes (Romans 8:18-25), with the real possibility of lapsing into doubt, temptation, or despair. On the other hand, for the hearer of the divine promise, 'the expected future does not have to develop within the framework of the possibilities inherent in the present, but arises from that which is possible to the God of promise.' (p. 103).

The fact that Christian eschatology points to a future in which our present experience of reality will be superseded, has important consequences for our knowledge of God and for the current debate about natural theology. At present 'we walk by faith, not by sight' (2 Corinthians 5:7). The eschatological perspective discloses that the proofs of God's existence cannot have full validity until everything is made manifest at the consummation of history. 'All proofs of God are at bottom anticipations of that eschatological reality in which God is revealed in

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all things to all.' (p. 281, cf. pp. 89-94, 272-82). Hence, as Hans Iwand remarks, 'The reform that is required of theology today consists in assigning revelation to this age, but natural theology to the age to come.'

Christian eschatology, with its historical horizon of promise and fulfilment, stands in direct contrast to the 'epiphany of the eternal present' (p. 29) or 'mysticism of being' (p. 30) found in the Hellenistic mystery religions, Eastern mysticism, and poetic inspiration. Insofar as Barth, Bultmann and Tillich reduce the historical future of Biblical eschatology to the *nunc aeturnum* (eternal now) of monistic religion and philosophy, Moltmann believes they have seriously distorted the nature and focus of Christian hope (pp. 26-69, 84-94). In making the *eschaton* a present reality, they have in fact accepted the outlook of the ancient pagan epiphany religions and reversed the standpoint which Paul took against Hellenism (pp. 154-65).

Moltmann's temporal understanding of eschatology enables him to make a significant contribution to contemporary discussion about the relationship of Christianity and history. He emphasises the linear-developmental view of history that is the distinctive legacy of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, in contrast to the cyclical-recurrence understanding which is the worldview of ancient and modern mythopoeic cultures (pp. 245-70). Moreover, Moltmann exposes the limitations of such conceptual tools of the historian as universality and analogy when approaching history understood in this genuinely historical manner, especially when treating a unique, unparalleled event like the resurrection of Jesus (pp. 172-82, 270-2).

Christian eschatology, through the God who calls 'Behold, I make all things new' (Revelation 21:5), opens human beings to genuinely new historical experience. The God 'with whom all things are possible' (Matthew 19:26), who 'gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist' (Romans 4:17), discloses a horizon of new possibilities for those who believe, delivering us from despair, and freeing us for loving service and hope-filled mission in society (pp. 32-6, 304-38). The Christian hope calls us to become involved in the renewal of the world, and gives us courage to transform institutions, economics, society and politics in a service that cannot rest satisfied with any of its accomplished achievements. 'Faith can expend itself in the pain of love, and assume the form of a servant,' says Moltmann, 'because it is upheld by the assurance of hope in the resurrection of the dead.' (p. 338).

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