

1). I know that last week Jared spoke on the theme of both sorrow and hope, and that he finished up reading from John's vision in Revelation 21
And he ended with these words –
In these days of the greatest sorrow, this is the hope that we cling to, even if only by our fingernails. This is the hope that sustains and heals and restores us.

Today I felt it right to take a closer look at this word 'hope', and the difference it can make in difficult days

2). But first of all, we need to think about what we mean by hope?

Hope is a feeling – a positive feeling about the future

Hope is a feeling, whereas trust is an action – trust is an action based on hope

Hope can be reasonable – if you've worked hard, it's reasonable to hope you'll do well in the exam

If you've got the right qualifications and experience, it's reasonable to hope you'll get the job you've applied for

The opposite of reasonable hope is desperate hope – when you haven't worked at all, or you've no qualifications or experience,

Or, dare I say it, if you're watching Scotland play football

Hope fulfilled results in feelings of joy and gladness

Hope unfulfilled, or hopes dashed, leads to feelings of sadness and disappointment

But these aren't the opposite of hope

The opposite of hope is hopelessness – when there is nothing to hope for, or when your hopes have been crushed

And hopelessness leads to the feeling of despair.

3). What does the Bible teach us about hope?

Today's reading are words addressed to a whole people whose hopes have been crushed,
Who find they are in that place of hopelessness and despair

Isaiah 40.18-31

These words of Isaiah are aimed at a people who had lost everything
Whose land had been invaded / city destroyed / herded off into Babylonian captivity
All the things they had put their hopes in had let them down

- Their rulers – appointed by God of the line of David – dead or captive
- Their city walls – they had thought was impregnable - destroyed
- Their Temple – where they believed God made his dwelling destroyed / its sacred treasures looted

It was all gone, and their hopes with it

They had nothing left, and nothing to hope for

4). To me, the key to understanding this passage is v. 27

The people are stunned,

They are devastated by what has happened to them
And their response is to say..

My way is hidden from God

My cause is disregarded by Him

i.e. 'We don't think God knows what's happened, and if he does, we don't think he cares enough to do anything'

It may be there are some people listening to me today who can identify with these words
Things are not easy just now – on a number of levels

This last week the news has been full of the collapse of Government in Afghanistan

And the devastating consequences for many of the ordinary people living there

These are also uncertain times for people in Scotland, as we struggle to emerge from a pandemic

And they are unsettling times for the Church too, as we try to work out what God's plans are for the future

And then, on a personal level, there will be the devastation of losing a loved one

Someone who you had been thinking and praying about for a number of weeks

And so it may well be that you sometimes find yourself thinking or even saying something like..

Our way is hidden from God

Our cause is disregarded by Him

5). So, how does God respond?

The passage I've just read divides itself into two sections

The first part of each section begins with the phrase - '*To whom will you compare me..*'

And the second part is marked by the response – '*Do you not know, have you not heard?*'

i.e. the first part of each section is a reminder of who God is, and the second part is reminding us what he does

But the overall thrust of the passage is to speak of the God who is far greater than any earthly power or idol

But who still cares about the poor and the lost and the weak and the vulnerable

v.18 – *To whom will you compare God?* With idols made by human hands?

Their Babylonian captors had surrounded themselves with great and beautiful idols

These were the things they worshipped

the things in which they put their trust

the things they saw as the source of their power

'*Do you not know, have you not heard?*' says God

From where I am looking down from, these great and mighty Babylonians look like grasshoppers

And all their scary idols are just lumps of wood and stone

I can easily reduce all their princes to nothing, despite their idols

I can easily sweep them all away

In other words, don't think that God doesn't see what is going on
And don't think that he's too weak to do anything about it
Because he can and he will when the time is right
(And, of course, he does – the great Babylonian Empire lasted only a few short generations)

v.28 *'To whom will you compare me?'* says the Lord

I who created the heavens above?

Who knows each star by name>

Who holds them in place by my power and strength alone?

Do you not know, have you not heard?'

I never grow weary, and my understanding is too great for you to comprehend

But I DO care – not just about the stars, but about the very least of living things

And especially about those who are feeling weary / weak / too tired to go on

And the passage finishes with these wonderful words of promise – v.31

It's a well-known image

An image that has inspired some very well-known songs

An image that captures the very real difference that hope can make to those who are struggling with despair

I had a conversation a few months ago with an old friend of mine, about the power of hope

He had been reading the memoirs of Victor Frankl – a concentration camp survivor

Frankl wrote about how people's survival in those death camps was not dependant on things like their fitness and health

It was dependant on whether or not they chose to hope

Hope is something we can choose to do, and from it flows trust

Hope renews our strength

It enables us to rise up above the situation we have found ourselves in

It enables us to see things the way God sees them – the God who does know and does care

And when we do, all the confusion, and uncertainty, and doubts we are struggling with, will slowly turn to trust

6). As I was preparing for today, I did a search of the file I keep my sermons in on my laptop, and I discovered that over the years I've used the word *hope* in 589 different sermons

What I found more interesting, though, was when I searched for the word *hope* in the Bible, I found it occurs about the same number of times in the OT as it does in the NT – despite the OT being about four times as long

And, while its occurrence is a bit patchy in the OT, in the NT its occurrence is fairly evenly spread throughout.

And all of this points me to the fact that when it comes to hope, Jesus' presence makes all the difference.

We see this clearly in the Beatitudes

One of the most NB things to realise when reading the Beatitudes in Matthew 5 is that they are not conditional

They are not dependant on us, our behaviour

The blessings Jesus is promising here are unconditional blessings – signs of the grace of God

They are the blessings of being in Jesus' presence

Wherever we are and whenever we let him into our lives...

If we are poor in spirit, we will be welcomed into his Kingdom

If we are in mourning, we will be comforted

If we are meek, we will inherit the earth...

It may well be that you find yourself in a dark place just now

You've followed Jesus all your life, you've done your very best, but right now you are finding it a bit of a struggle

And you are thinking, *'it's all very well talking about Jesus' presence, but how am I going to get him back in my life again?'*

Listen again to these words - v.31

I love that image of an eagle

An eagle doesn't do nothing, but neither does it flap about

Rather it simply seeks out the currents of rising air

And that's what lifts it up into the heavens and keeps it there

Hope is like a current of rising air

It has the power to lift us up above our troubles

And give us the strength we need to stay there

So, if you are in that dark place just now, maybe you need to seek out one of those currents of hope

They may well be different for each one of us

For me, I know it can help to get out on my e-bike and cycle up to the top of the

Braids

so I can spend some time alone with my Lord and master – one of my currents of hope

Another is to seek out a good friend, someone I trust, so I can talk things through with them, and pray with them

Another is to spend some time helping someone else – helps to restore my sense of perspective

Currents of hope - We all might have different ones – Currents that draw us nearer to God again.

Amen