

Hope

Notes written by Haddon Willmer for Keith White and John Collier in preparation for the CT Experiment on hope at the Cutting Edge conference 2008

What is to be said about hope in Child Theology?

First, in Christian theology and faith, hope is not only important, but also specific. We are not just to be hopeful, forward-looking, cheerful people. Hope is not just a question of temperament or attitude. It is not subjective or internal to personality. There is promise, and so hope has content: not merely do we hope for this rather than that, but what we hope for inspires and generates hope. We hope subjectively, because there is something to hope for.

This I think is what N T Wright in his book on Hope at least begins with and is concerned with.

Christians hope for the kingdom of God in Christ. It is not enough, however, to believe that and then to let Christ breed in us a hopeful outlook, to make us cheery people. That is very commonly done. To be hopeful people, forward looking in all circumstances – that is what we really care about – and Christ is useful and effective in making us hopeful. Christ gives people optimism, a spirit or attitude.

Many years ago, I was turned off by a Wayside Pulpit, which said: *“The world looks cheery from behind a cheerful face.”* I do not want that kind of illusory make-believe of an internal attitudinal religion. But its popularity arises from the enormous difficulty of giving any other meaning to the word hope. Hope in itself is always difficult because it is insubstantial – it is a form of the future, i.e. the unknown. Uncertainty, the possibility of its being otherwise in the event, cannot be eliminated from hope. Hope always carries the threat and fear of disappointment. Hope is exciting, to those who like danger, because it is akin to a gamble or a close game or to life: the ancient wisdom that calls no man happy until he is dead takes account of the frailty of hope. Even those who have lived many years in goodness and prosperity may be disillusioned in their last days.

This is the way it is for hope in human life generally. Is it any different with Christian hope, hope in God through Christ? It is and it is not. Faith holds on to God through all things, looking for the promise, (though he slay me, yet will I trust him) but that does not eliminate the danger of disappointment which is the other side of hope. It is a way of dealing with the threat, which differs from letting disappointment have the premature victory. This problematic of the relation between hope and disappointment, sought success and found failure, is a reason why we are reserved and uncertain about concrete defined hopes, and why hope shrinks to being resilient, coming up smiling, and the church thinks its ministry is to make hopeful people, even though it cannot say what precisely we are hoping for.

Wright argues that Christian hope has definite content. It leads us to expect one sort of ultimate future rather than others. Christ makes hopeful people by defining and opening up what can be hoped for in a reshaping of the world, the creation. He argues that Christ gives something particular and describable which generates hope because it is worth hoping for, because it is good and because it transcends the passing world? I think this is the right tack, for Christian faith and communities. We should not exhort people to smile, as though their smiling will change the world in reality, for the better. That is Christian science, not Christian faith or Christian sense.

But we are still not out of the woods. The hope proposed, specified, by God in Christ, seems fantastic to anyone taught by experience or wise and scientific in this world. That God is, that God is as in Jesus, that the raising of Jesus or the being of ‘any one’ in Christ betokens the making new of all things, comprise a specific hope which much in the world does not support. So we are asked to believe in hope against hope. The content of this promise of God provokes the fear that it cannot be, and that to follow God in Jesus gives us nothing more than ‘to go to die with him’. No amount of preaching which berates the world for its unbelief, derides the wisdom of men which is folly before God, and no mere assertion of the promise can remove the shadow, of the possible non-occurrence of the fulfilment. The substance of Christianity, when it is deployed as a working faith for real people on earth now, has to be made up of more than the assertive proclamation and celebration of the promise. Its full body as a working faith grows as it is a fellowship of

people, working together in various ways, to discern and hold on to the promise, to survive the trials and temptations which might lead to them turning away and giving up, like Esau who lost his inheritance. Christians-giving-up make up a significant part of Christianity in practice, so the ministry which helps to keep them hoping also has to be a significant part of it (Heb 10.25,26). Enduring, even the contradiction of sinners (Heb 12)

The churchly, pastoral body of Christianity - analyse from this point of view.

So far that makes sense. And it responds to Wright's challenge, to think Christian hope as having specific content and not simply being the cultivation of persons with a hopeful take on life. But nothing yet has been said about children. And what is said now does not fit neatly into the categories of the argument so far.

Growing children involves enabling the development of hopeful persons. That is implied in the concept of self-esteem perhaps.

Do children give hope? Are they signs of hope or causes of it? It is commonly thought so. But perhaps not so commonly justified.

"Unto us a child is born". This text is significant because it is unusual, contrary to experience. It is unrealistic to make the child the content and basis of hope. In reality we have to fear, and to be in uncertainty, about a child. The reaction of Mary, with the help of Simeon, is truer: "this child is set for the rising and falling.... and a sword shall pierce your own heart also."

A child often confronts us with the badness and inhospitality of the world, which is a dangerous and unhappy place.

So a child is not, simply by virtue of being a child, a sign or ground of hope, as an assurance about a particular future's being on its way.

A child is not a container, bringer or sign of hope in this sense.

But a child calls us to hope, and therefore to fear and even to feel despair, and therefore to seek for a well-grounded hope.

A child challenges us to value what is given, to nurture the possibility, to act in hope for the child, precisely because there is so much potential for good, and so much potential for loss. And when this potential is lost, the loss is great, because the child is not trivial.

The child thus requires, drives, us to hope. It is no good here being hopeful in attitude or feeling. What we look for is that *the good* we hope for is realised. A child leads us to look forward to a whole life – which is long enough even if we think it ends with physical death; it is even greater if it goes beyond that death. When we look forward, we are led to hope not just that the child will have a happy childhood or a good education – we hope for the child's whole life, that it will so be for the child that all her days she will be able to praise God freely and glorify God by flourishing in goodness. We hope, in short, for genuine salvation – which is abundant life, not just scraping into heaven at the last, despite everything, or escaping hell.

So hope requires us to imagine salvation and work for it. But can we find the way to it, with any certainty? Is not the child vulnerable and we with the child to all kinds of frustration, deviation, disappointment? Do we not settle ourselves bravely to be disappointed? Life is successful when we find some way of persuading ourselves that defeat is not disastrous.

The child may enable us for a little while, in odd moments, or until the child goes to school, or becomes a teenager, to think that it will be different for this child. This child will be happy and good and safe. Parents may cultivate a special belief and hope for their child. But no one is safe from the common failures, which take different forms, but in their essence are the falling short of the glory of God. No one is safe though they do not all suffer in obvious or extreme ways. The point here is that no child gives us the warrant to expect with certainty that all will be well.

The child in truth leads us all to hope, and then to be aware that there is no routine procedure in the world by which good hopes are regularly realised. And so, to hope is immediately to be vulnerable to the fear of disappointment, and of the inability to succeed in overcoming every challenge that may come our way, in the person of the child.

Now some give up all hoping. It is not worth looking for salvation, when the gate is so narrow. People settle for all life as accidental and transitory. Many are born and it is natural that many are sooner or later rubbished in some way. That is the powerful mechanism of evolution, which has not stopped when human being appeared. This not uncommon view has much to be said for it. It is to be opposed in principle and all along the line by Christian faith, but Christian faith does not oppose things because they are wrong or untrue to the world, but only because they do not fit with God, who is often invisible in the world as it is.

So the question of hope for the child and the question of a truthful faith in God go together.

It is obvious when we observe the world that God is not effectively for all people, including children, who suffer at the point of their need. They starve and die; they are abused and no one cares till it is too late. If God is for them, it is not in time, in their time. It is like Lazarus: God waits a few days, till Lazarus is certainly dead and out of time.

Christian hope is in God, and so is a special kind of hope. It is hope that takes the full weight of the world's hopelessness, because it waits till Lazarus is dead. It does not soften all that counts against hope by sorting it out before disappointment and disorder and death are rampant. It lets them have their play. It lets the world, the fallen world, be the world. It offers nothing to those who will not reckon with this.

And yet it is hope, it gives promise; it opens pilgrim way and calls us to hope for the salvation laid up for us (I Pet 1). It is a key part of theology to help us find language and ways of thinking which are honest and persuasive and inspiring, in the reality of the human situation, where hope has this peculiar complex problematic.

How to talk about the hopelessness of the world and the hope of the Gospel without the truth of one or the other being denied? How to avoid writing off the world as hopeless (quoting Eph 2, without God and without hope) and looking for a hope beyond this world – and so becoming unworldly, inhuman in our living?

The child requires us to work at these theological, linguistic and spiritual issues, because it is not enough to have an ultimate otherworldly hope for a child, who may live on this earth for a hundred years. Day by day, the child is called to live in fellowship with God in a world where there is much that would separate us from the love of God, if it could only have its way – which is very nearly does in many cases.