

Life Assurance: Living Hope - Sunday 30th October 2022

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[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. How are you? Good? Good. Good to see you. I hope that was positive. Did you know, did you know, our brains are like Teflon for all the good and positive stuff that comes our way, but like Velcro for all the negative stuff.

So the good things that happen, too often they go into our minds and then almost as quickly, they kind of scoot off into the distance. But the bad things, the negative stuff, our brain holds onto that like sticky Velcro.

And if you know this experience, you know it can go around and around and around in our thoughts. Now, I know this is true because when I get course feedback from students about a module, if I've been teaching on that, I can get 19 really enthusiastic, really positive, really encouraging, really affirming comments about how much they've enjoyed the course.

And then I can get one negative, non-committal and dissatisfied comment. Guess which one will be rolling around in my head.

Okay. So it just seems to be that's how we're hardwired. And the evidence for this is in our amygdala, which is sort of in the centre of our brains, if you've ever seen a picture of the amygdala in the brain.

[1 : 36] And it's the part of the brain that processes strong emotions like fear. And it's where we get the fight or flight response from.

And neuroscientists have termed this hardwired bias to look for threats rather than opportunities as the negativity bias.

I don't know if any of you have come across that. And what they think, it's because our distant ancestors basically had two jobs. Okay. One, to get carrots.

Okay. And two, to avoid sticks. Okay. So carrots being food, water and shelter. And sticks, predators, you know, hazards, not being kicked out of the tribe.

And if you don't get a carrot today, well, then probably there'll be another one along tomorrow. But if you don't avoid that saber-toothed tiger that's stalking you, it's game over, isn't it?

[2 : 40] And it can, if we're not mindful of this, mean that we err towards the negative. We kind of set the bar low in terms of our expectations.

And I think that the comedian Bill Bailey, who's one of my favourites, actually captures this idea really well. It's quite different from happiness around the world because we process happiness in a different way in Britain.

You know, American friends, I've met Australians, they're much more in the moment. Oh yeah, they're in tonight. Woo-hoo! They're much more, much more upbeat, much more positive. And I say to my Australian friends, how are you?

Awesome. Awesome. I mean, genuinely. In a non-ironic way. How are you, mate? Awesome. How was yesterday? Awesome, mate. Today's going to be awesome. What are you doing tomorrow? I don't know. Picking up stones in the rain.

It's going to be awesome. We never say that in a non-ironic way.

[3 : 40] In Britain, the best you're going to get, because our happiness is based on this premise, things could have been a lot worse. Right? That's as good as it gets in Britain.

That's why the standard greeting in Britain, how are you? Not too bad. That's as good as it gets in old blighty. Not too bad.

Things are clearly bad, but they're not quite as bad as we thought they were going to be. We've dialed down our expectation to an acceptable level of disappointment.

We're eking out our expectation in diminishing increments of reduced joy. Things are not too bad. There's the abyss.

We're not in the abyss. We're in the car park and snack area, adjacent to the abyss. It's not too bad. It's good, isn't it?

[4 : 37] Who's been in the car park and snack area, adjacent to the abyss, I wonder? I've got to be honest. I'll be absolutely honest with you.

Over these last couple of years, particularly through the pandemic, I've had my own health issues, and I lost my dad and some good friends.

The frightening effects that we see around us with climate change, and the terrible consequences of the war that's kind of raging on in Ukraine at the moment, and the political mess that our own country is in at the moment, and the cost of living crisis, and the energy crisis that we face.

You know, and we could go on, couldn't we? It's difficult. I don't know about you, but it's difficult not to feel pulled down by that. It sort of feels a bit disingenuous to me to just put a brave face on and say, oh, well, you know, let's hope things get better.

You know, but just to hedge our bets, you know, we'll put a foot in the chances are it won't camp as well. Okay, maybe that's the realist in us.

[5 : 47] I don't know. Lisa's even given me, that's Lisa, my wife, sitting over here. I like to think, I like to think affectionately, if not very flatteringly, a nickname when I begin to wander down this path.

Eeyore. That's what she calls me. Eeyore. How about that? I'm not meaning to shame you in public, Lisa, but... And she'll say, when I start to say this, she'll say, oh, here comes Eeyore.

Eeyore. The worrying thing is, the worrying thing is, there's a bit of me that quite likes Eeyore. Don't get me wrong, I don't want to be Eeyore.

I mean, who wants to be around that person? But there's a bit of me that goes out to that little fella. Maybe it's just feeling for the underdog. I don't know.

He's definitely got some self-esteem issues going on, hasn't he? He doesn't see himself as much of a donkey, does he? That tail really doesn't help. And he doesn't have much of a home, and he's rather downtrodden.

[6 : 57] And I think in the cartoon, I'm trying to remember, I think in the cartoon, there's often a little cloud that sort of follows Eeyore around, that sort of, wherever he goes, the cloud goes with him. And he's absolutely lovable, but of course, there's something very sad, isn't there, about Eeyore?

And I think it's the absence of hope in his life. Often when we use this word hope, it sort of suggests uncertainty or doubt about the outcome.

You know, we often say, don't we, let's hope so, or I hope you get on okay. And of course, it's really good to be optimistic, and I mean, let's face it, being Eeyore, or even being around Eeyore for too long, is pretty draining.

But as I'm sure you know, it's not how the Bible uses the word hope. In the New Testament, the most common Greek word that's used for hope is *elpis*.

It's the personification of hope. There's no sense of doubt attached to that word. It's a confidence, expectation, or assurance, based upon a really solid and sure foundation.

[8 : 14] In other words, there's no doubt about it. And of course, there are hundreds and hundreds, aren't there, of references in the Bible to hope.

And one that is really popular, and I'm looking at Jane at the moment, and I know she likes, and it's in Isaiah 40, and it says, but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength.

They shall mount up with wings like eagles. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint. And it's really good to hear.

It's really encouraging. It's stirring stuff. But you know, I wonder, often given all the challenges and the difficulties and the circumstances that we face, if we're really honest, I wonder if sometimes it's just, I hope I can get through the next hour.

Okay? The next day or week or month. You know, I'm not too sure whether, really, I'm soaring. And if you, if you, if you know that that's, that's you, I just want to say to you this morning, you know what?

[9 : 27] That's okay. We've said it here before at St. John's, but it's okay not to be okay. But of course, of course, God does not want to leave us stuck there.

And this whole series that we've been doing over the last, I don't know, is it seven, eight weeks now? Maybe more. Of Life Assurance has been about how we live, how we live in the midst of all the difficulties and often negative things that are going on around us and in our lives.

And I think right now we're in this, to me, it feels like we're in this tsunami of uncertainty and insecurity sort of washing around us. And it's leaving a lot of people feeling pretty battered and bruised.

And of course, I'm not just talking about us here at St. John's. But we have to, we have to learn how to navigate this and find the courage and the compassion to help others through this as well.

And so yes, I know, the series has been a bit heavy at times. I'm sure you've felt that. But I think that is what it feels like when you get real about wrestling with issues like our mental health or economic inequality or an openness to be healed and to be whole and to be restored in a deep encounter with God like Ruth was sharing last week.

[11:10] You know, this stuff is rarely, rarely easy. And so this morning as we draw into this series to a close, I want to look at how we, how do we hold on to the hope we have even when all the signs around us might leave us feeling a bit more like Eeyore.

In Peter's first letter in the New Testament, it says this, praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In his great mercy, he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

And commentators have kind of described Peter as the apostle of hope. I don't know how well you know the letter, 1 Peter and 2 Peter, but it was written to Christians that were scattered all over the country that we now know as Turkey.

And they were the diaspora of believers in a hostile world facing some pretty tough opposition. The word suffering occurs more often in this short little letter than any other book in the whole of the New Testament.

That's something to think about. And I think the focus of Peter's letter is captured really well here in these opening verses.

[12:51] Do you know with everything that they were facing, Peter must have known the temptation was for some of the people in those communities to throw the towel in, to turn away, to give up on this new way of life in Jesus.

And it was just bringing them way too much anguish, too much that they could bear. And Peter says, stand firm, be assured you have a living hope, a new birth, a new reality, a new kingdom that's already here through the life, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus.

Stand firm in it. And the grace and the peace that God pours out on us will be the anchor that will hold you when the going gets really tough.

I think Peter is looking ahead. It's rooted in this idea of this eschatological promise that we have.

That's where all this stuff is heading. A new earth, a new heaven. And it's as if Jesus is drawing us forward to be living examples in this new kingdom.

[14:20] Hope is something that comes from who is ahead of us. Jesus has already walked through the brambles and the thorns.

So it's the future that we then step into. And there's no promises. It's not going to be easy. But it's full of possibilities. And most of the rest of the letter that Peter gives is then about reaffirming their identity.

Know who you are. And then he talks about how they are called to live in this really difficult place. And that theme is picked up again in well it's picked up in lots of places in the Bible but it's picked up particularly in Romans chapter 5 verses 3 to 5.

We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God and more than that we rejoice in our sufferings. Let me just stop there.

More than that we rejoice in our sufferings. Moment of honesty. Are you rejoicing in your suffering right now?

[15:36] This is a really hard thing isn't it that Paul is teaching here. And he goes on knowing that suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope.

And hope does not put us to shame because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. And that's the thing. This hope in God that Paul is describing comes out of our pain and suffering.

Not in spite of it. And to be fair he doesn't say we take any joy in our suffering. Rather he says we rejoice in our suffering knowing what it is that it produces.

It's not that God wants us to suffer. Of course he doesn't but he uses that to transform us. Now for me the last couple of years haven't been great health wise.

I've sort of had ongoing issues with my heart and I've had to learn to slow down. To back off. To not want to do everything.

[16:49] To be the guy I was 30 years ago. Oh sorry when I was 30. Well she's nearly 30 years actually. Oops. And it has been difficult particularly when I've been quite active in the past.

But I've had to learn to be a lot more, and I mean a lot more patient. And I think it's one of the things that God has been guiding and helping sort of pull me through.

And one of the things, there have been others, but one of the things that's helped me has been walking. Now I know I'm guessing for other people as well that's true. It's that time to sort of process stuff.

And sometimes, particularly if I'm walking on my own, it's almost like I'm embodying a prayer that goes beyond words. You know, in the physicality of feeling the ache in my muscles and bones.

I definitely get more now. You know, as I'm pulling up over a hill or working a particularly difficult bit over the chase. Or I'm just taking time to sort of, I don't know, just breathe in, drink in, you know, a lovely view.

[18:04] All the sights and all the sounds, particularly, you know, you begin to notice more as the seasons change. And in all of that, then allowing myself to bring those experiences to my senses like a prayer that's beyond words.

And there's something quite beautiful about that. And then in all of that, I have felt that I've been drawn closer and closer to God and I have a deeper sense of peace about everything.

I'm sure, you know, that echoes experiences that you've had as well. But, you know, things change and I know that I'm changing.

And I think that's healthy. I think that's how it should be. Richard Rohr, the Christian writer and speaker, says this, our spiritual lives and our Christian hope are often shaped by whether we will allow God to step in and hold us in our anxiety, in our pain and our suffering so that he can transform us, so that we don't hurt ourselves or others even more.

Because if we don't allow God to transform our pain, then we will almost always, inevitably, pass that on to others.

[19:33] It's just part of our human condition. And in a much more profound way, Viktor Frankl was an Austrian-Jewish neurologist and a psychiatrist.

He was deported to a Nazi concentration camp in Czechoslovakia in 1942 and then on to Auschwitz and he survived.

The war. And afterwards he wrote a book to find some hope and meaning out of this horrific experience. The book was called Man's Search for Meaning.

I've read it, I've got it. And I'll tell you, it's not an easy read. It's not a long book, but it's not an easy read. But it is profoundly insightful. As a psychologist, he wanted to know why some of the camp prisoners held on and survived and why others died.

And what he found was that within the camp, everything, everything is taken away. Everything is stripped away from you.

[20:38] Family, health, money, your profession, your position in life, all gone in the blink of an eye. life. And the foundation of our lives is laid bare.

And from his observations and counselling sessions that he did with survivors, Frankl found that unless you had a spiritual cornerstone, unless you had something that went beyond yourself, unless you had an unshakable why to live, an indestructible living hope, we might say, then it was almost impossible to endure the suffering.

And those prisoners either died or became so brutalised by the experience that they went through that they then just perpetuated the violence of the camp to others, living with little or no hope, empty and hollowed out.

One of my all-time favourite films, which I'm pretty sure I've shared here before, I know I've shown some clips here before, is The Shawshank Redemption.

Who likes The Shawshank Redemption? Yeah? Okay? And if you haven't seen it, I'm afraid I'm going to be spoiling it somewhat for you. Not too much, though. It's still worth it. Okay?

[22 : 08] It's with Tim Robbins and Morgan Freeman, about 93, 94, I think the film was, and it is an absolutely brilliant film. The language can be a little bit fruity, okay?

There is obviously some violence in it, but if you've not seen it, I would highly commend it to you, okay? The strapline for the film is, fear can hold you prisoner, hope can set you free, and that pretty much sums up the film.

It's an incredibly, incredibly powerful story, full of Christian, Christian imagery, themes, and symbolism. If you don't know the story, it's about Andy Dufresne, on the left there, Tim Robbins, who is falsely accused and convicted of killing his wife and lover, and then given two sentences at Shawshank State Penitentiary.

And Shawshank is a dark place. it is a dark, dark place, okay? But Andy refuses to give up hope, and he refuses to allow the corrupt system that's sort of going on in the prison to break him. And he portrays, I think, this wonderfully subversive, non-violent character who will change the system and bring hope to his fellow inmates.

[23 : 36] Whether it's cold beer, uplifting music, or teaching them to riot, all small acts of kindness, or of defiance, really, that slowly inspire others in the prison to dare to hope.

And there in Shawshank, he meets Red, played by Morgan Freeman there on the right, who's already served 20 years at Shawshank, and over time, they build up this enduring friendship, and Red sees in Andy something or someone that he's never seen before.

And the whole story then is told through Red's point of view and becomes his testimony about Andy. Now there's a point in the film when Andy locks himself in the warden's office, he wants to find a way to reach out and reach through to the other prisoners.

And so he plays a record for Madame Butterfly's opera through the Tannoy system, and this beautiful aria kind of floods through Shawshank prison, and it gives testimony to this glimpse of hope.

Andy? I have no idea to this day what those two Italian ladies were singing about. Truth is, I don't want to know, some things are best left unsaid.

[25 : 07] I like to think they were singing about something so beautiful it can't be expressed in words, and makes your heart ache because of it. I tell you those voices soared, higher and farther than anybody in a gray place dares to dream.

It was like some beautiful bird flapped into our drab little cage and made those walls dissolve away. And for the briefest of moments, every last man at Shawshank felt free.

It pissed the warden off something awful. Open the door. Open it up! Dufresne, open this door! Turn that off! I am warning you, Dufresne, turn that off!

It's a beautiful act of defiance against a system that is completely wrong. And of course, Andy gets thrown into solitary and when he gets out, he's sitting with his friends around the canteen table and he shares with them how he got through that.

[26 : 33] And it's probably, and I'm going to play a couple of clips about this, they're all very short, but it's probably one of the most poignant moments in the film. You couldn't play something good, huh?

Hank Williams or something? They broke the door down before I could take requests. Was it worth it, two weeks in the hall? Easiest time I ever did. No such thing as easy time in the hall. That's right, a week in the hall is like a year.

I had Mr. Mozart to keep me company. So they let you tote that record player down there, huh? It's in here. In here.

That's the beauty of music. They can't get that from you. haven't you ever felt that way about music? Didn't make much sense in here.

Here's where it makes the most sense. You need it so you don't forget. Forget? Forget that there are places in the world that aren't made out of stone, that there's something inside that they can't get to, that they can't touch.

[27 : 50] It's yours. What are you talking about? Hope. Hope? Let me tell you something, my friend.

Hope is a dangerous thing. Hope can drive a man insane. it's got no use on the inside. I better get used to that idea.

Like Brooks did. If you want to find out about Brooks you'll have to watch it. It's the one conversation in the film that seems to make Red angry.

And I think Red had given up on hope a long time ago. It was just a cruel joke. And it's not by accident, I think, that Andy was the only innocent man in Shawshank.

And he becomes best friends with Red. The only man in Shawshank who accepts that he was guilty. And you see, I don't think this is actually a story about Andy's redemption.

[29 : 07] redemption. I think it's about Red's redemption. It's his recovery of hope. So, spoilers here, but, thank you, near the end of the film, Andy breaks out of prison and he crawls through a 500-meter pipe full of raw sewage.

and he gets out and rips off, at the other end of the pipe, as he gets out of the prison, and rips off his clothes and the rain pours down. And it's an incredibly climatic scene in the film, kind of symbolically washing him clean of all the filth he's covered in, all the things that have happened in Shawshank.

Freedom. Freedom. Freedom. And if it's just about Andy, then the story kind of ends there, doesn't it? But it's not. He prepares the way for his friend Red to come to where he is in a Mexican paradise.

He goes ahead of him, and when the time is right, draws Red to join, to be with him. I think it's incredibly symbolic.

■■■■ Dear Red, if you're reading this you've gotten out And if you've come this far, maybe you're willing to come a little further.

[31 : 00] You remember the name of the town, don't you? Se va t'neil. I could use a good man to help me get my project on wheels.

I'll keep an eye out for you, and the chessboard ready. Remember, Red, hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things. And no good thing ever dies.

I will be hoping that this letter finds you, and finds you well. Your friend, Andy. Now if you know the film, there are three parole hearing scenes for Red.

One at the beginning, one in the middle, and one at the end of the film. And I think that's a journey of Red's transformation. Because we get to the last hearing, and Red finally speaks as a man no longer bound by fear.

He doesn't care now whether he leaves or stays at Shawshank, because his friend, Andy, has broken free from this cruel and oppressive regime.

[32 : 12] He's exposed the truth. And again, if you know the film, he's exposed the warden for the man that he really is. Red is no longer afraid of whatever the future holds.

And he obviously gets released. And there is something incredibly fragile, but ultimately unbreakable in his spirit now.

Hope. Hope. I think, you know, it's up there, isn't it? I don't know where it is, but it's in number one, two or three of the top films ever.

but for me it's an incredibly powerful film it's a powerful story about living hope now our hope isn't we know optimism it isn't wishful thinking or some vague notion that things will be okay or that by putting a brave face on things when we don't quite know what to do or what to say it's not that it's steadfast it's meaningful it's a pervading hope in all circumstances in all situations whatever they are it's a hope that endures it's a hope that holds us like an anchor in whatever storm we might find ourselves in hope for the here and now and for the life in the new kingdom here but not quite here yet hope rooted in the resurrected Christ the sign of a new beginning a new hope for a new kingdom and the thing is it's not just a hope for us it is a hope for the whole of creation

Paul says the whole of the earth cries out groans in anticipation for the coming kingdom the resurrected life at the end of Paul's letter to the Romans I think there's a wonderful passage as he's drawing together all the threads of the letter to the Romans and he says this may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit and for me it's so full of energy and potential I think Paul wanted those Christians living in Rome right under Caesar's nose to be a people of hope a community of hope in a society that so desperately needed to see a different way and maybe that's a good definition of what it means for us to be church particularly right now people gathering together to share out our lives their love our faith our hope with others and in doing that becoming a beacon of hope for the community around us more often than not

[35 : 26] God doesn't change our circumstances he changes us and slowly he draws us into a new way of being of seeing and thinking and we discover in that an inner peace and a strength to endure whatever it is that life has to throw at us it's not so much about thinking of God behind us or

standing over us or pushing us out but rather of God ahead of us God inviting us into greater freedom and greater wholeness and greater maturity and greater relationship and diversity with others and as we step into that we get to be part of it and to see it wonderfully unfold we make a choice we choose hope instead of fear and it's not that life necessarily gets any easier or that we no longer have to deal with all the difficulties and the circumstances we face no but now we have the assurance a living hope deep within us

Amen Amen Thank you.