

Knowing Me, Knowing You: Hope vs Optimism - 3rd July 2022

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Date: 03 July 2022

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[0 : 00] Good morning, beautiful people. So today I'm going to talk about the practice of being hopeful, how to be resilient in your hope, and how to be hopeful even when the world feels like an unhopeful place. So to get there, I think I'm just going to paint you a picture of where I'm going today. So you have to picture four-year-old Ruth. Now, four-year-old, I've softened a lot with age, so you have to imagine someone a bit more extreme in every direction. And four-year-old Ruth would go each week with her mum to the science museum. And one week I arrived, and there was a particularly galling exhibit on cholera, which started through the journey of cholera, and you sort of see how cholera works. And then it takes you through the life of another four-year-old who had cholera, and in the end you'd attend this little Victorian funeral for the person. So it was truly traumatic.

I don't think my mum would have taken me to it if she'd known how it ended. But you can imagine, I was distraught. I actually howled for the best part of two days. How is it that the children don't have clean water? Isn't this an outrage? And in the end, when I was feeling very hopeless, my mum came upon a classic idea, which is she sent me around with a bucket to collect money for water aid.

Now, you've never seen more money being collected for water aid than by a howling four-year-old saying, the children have no water. How outrageous is it that the children have no water? But actually, it worked. It took what I thought was a hopeless situation and gave me a way of feeling hopeful about it. So to get started today, we're going to talk a bit about hope and something it gets confused with a bit, which is optimism. So I guess you all probably know about optimism. So if you see this glass, who would say it's half full? Let's see a show of hands. Well, we've got quite a good optimistic crowd.

And who would say it's half empty? Oh, no one wants to admit being half empty. And who would have another clever answer that wasn't half full or half empty? It's balanced.

Very good. Very good. My sister would say the glass is two times too big, but then she's a civil engineer. So that's her attitude to life. So what is optimism? I guess on average, optimism is the belief that things will turn out well, on average, in the end, most of the time. So I think we all kind of know optimists when we see them. So we've got a little bit of a quiz. So let's have this one.

[2 : 49] Eeyore. Would we say Eeyore is an optimist or a pessimist? That's very good. How about Tigger? Crazy. Crazy. The alternative view. Leslie Knope from Parks and Recreation.

Optimist. Optimist. Very good. Though if you can't tell, the big smile might give it away. So personally, I identify very strongly with Leslie Knope. I think that she's got a great attitude towards a lot of things. And how about Moaning Myrtle? Moaning Myrtle from Harry Potter.

Pessimist. Yes. Very good. And how about Jesus Christ? Oh, would we say he's an optimist? I would love to think that Jesus Christ was an optimist, as an optimist myself. But I think it might be a bit more complicated than that. Probably not a pessimist. I think this is where we get to the difference between hope and optimist.

Because I think, while I'd love to think that Jesus was just an optimist, I think what he's got is something a bit deeper than that. And I think that we can all criticise optimism for various reasons. And I think that we couldn't criticise Jesus for those reasons. So I'd say probably not. So I'd say he's hopeful, not optimistic. So the first criticism I'd say for optimists is that when you look at the world through rose-tinted glasses, sometimes that can stop you from seeing some of the difficult things in the world. Sometimes you can glaze over problems that other people have. And sometimes you can think, oh, well, it's all all right, really. I'm seeing the best in it. Certainly that's something I have struggled with in the past, as I've told you about, I'm sure. Another criticism of optimism that can sometimes definitely be applied to me, but definitely not to Jesus, is that sometimes when people come and tell you about something that is troubling them, you can have the yes-but inclination. Which is someone says, this is this very sad thing that's happening to me. And the temptation is to say, yes, but there are all these other good things in your life. Have you thought about it from this angle? This is not really a problem. You can definitely get past it. And obviously, we don't see Jesus doing that.

So for example, when the man is lowered through the roof so that Jesus can heal him, Jesus doesn't say, yes, you're crippled. But isn't it great that your family and friends are so sorted that they've got this great system that they're looking out for you, that they're willing to take their own roof apart to make sure that you see me? Jesus doesn't do any of that. Jesus heals him. So I guess I would say that Jesus models hopefulness and not optimism. So what is hope and why is it different?

[5 : 35] So in the New Testament, and it is different in the Old Testament, hope comes from the Greek word *elpis*. And that basically means expectation, trust, and confidence. It comes from the root word *elpeo*, which means to anticipate. So I guess in this context, Christian hope is about anticipating that God has saved us, that the kingdom of God is coming and is already here.

But I don't think it just means expecting the kingdom of God to happen and not living your life in a way that would help build the kingdom. I think hope is a more active word than that. I think it's very difficult to be hopeful sat on the sidelines. In reality, it's much easier to be hopeful when you feel you're contributing, even if the reality is that God has won the battle and all we're doing is holding the screwdriver while God changes the tire. I don't know if you need screwdrivers to change tires. You might not, but the analogy still works. So we're going to turn to a section of the Bible, one of the most famous sections in the whole New Testament, which is the one with that phrase, I am the way, the truth, and the life. And it kind of starts with Jesus talking to the disciples, but most particularly to Thomas, who we later see as Doubting Thomas. We're just going to watch that.

Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God. Believe also in me. My father's house has many rooms. If that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going.

Thomas said to him, Lord, we don't know where you are going. So how can we know the way? Jesus answered, I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the father except through me.

If you really know me, you will know my father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him. Philip said, Lord, show us the father and that will be enough for us.

[8 : 13] Jesus answered, don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the father. How can you say, show us the father?

Father, don't you believe that I am in the father and that the father is in me? The words I say to you, I do not speak on my own authority.

Rather, it is the father living in me who is doing his work. Believe me when I say that I am in the father and the father is in me.

Or at least believe on the evidence of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing.

And they will do even greater things than these. Because I am going to the father. A very powerful passage and obviously one you can get a lot out of.

[9 : 23] So we, at the start, hear Jesus say to Thomas, don't let your hearts be troubled. Or the version I says, don't be in turmoil. Don't be stressing, going round and round. Here's something you can trust in.

And remember, trusting in something is the foundation of hope, as we see in the Greek. I am leading you somewhere good, even if the road isn't that clear. I have thought about what ultimately happens to you.

And when you meet me, you are meeting God. And the way you reach your ultimate destination is through following me. And he also says, through doing the works that I would do.

Keeping your eyes on me and following the path I take through the world. Now probably, Thomas was actually looking for more concrete directions on exactly what to do and exactly how to get wherever Jesus is going.

Where to go and how to live abundantly. I mean, aren't we all? But somehow, this phrase of God's provides a shape that we can put our lives into. A shape, a path through following into the world.

[10 : 27] Which is somehow timeless. So much easier to apply to any situation. But when Jesus says, I am the way, the truth and the life. Jesus is at no point promising that our lives will turn out peachy or easy.

Or that we'll be clearly told what to do for every major decision. If you follow the path of Jesus, you're following the path of a man without an obvious place to call home. Without a reliable source of income.

Completely dependent on the women who are financially caring for him. And Jesus certainly never promises that things will turn out well in a, you have a great house, great income, great holidays kind of way.

Instead, we have a more complicated form of guidance. Following Jesus, keeping your eyes set on Jesus, offers us a path of radical compassion, relationship with God.

And through Jesus, we also hear God's ultimate vision for the world. Which is a world made up of people following the path of Christ. A vision of the world which I believe is summed up with, peace I leave you, my peace I give you.

[11 : 34] And I think we can see Jesus' ultimate vision for the world beautifully in the ancient words of the prophet Isaiah. Now, I initially chose quite a lot of this, Isaiah 11, and it is absolutely gorgeous.

But the first bit is picturing Jesus as a person. And demonstrating how he'll deal with the world. So we'll just have a little bit of a flavour of that.

So even those who can't afford a good defence will nevertheless get a fair and equitable judgement. With just a word, he will end wickedness and abolish oppression. With nothing more than the breath of his mouth, he will destroy evil.

He will clothe himself with righteousness and truth. With the impulse to right wrongs will be in his blood. With unwavering steps and integrity uncompromised, he will establish peace.

And a day will come when the wolf will lie peacefully beside the wobbly kneed lamb. And the leopard will lie down beside the young goat. Calf and the yearling, newborn and slow, will rest secure with the lion.

[12 : 36] And a little child will tend them all. Bears will graze with cows that they used to attack. Even the young will rest together. And the lion will eat hay, like gentle oxen.

Neither will a baby who plays next to a cobra hole, nor a toddler who sticks his hand into a nest of vipers suffer harm. All my holy mountain will be free of anything hurtful or destructive.

For as the waters fill the sea, the entire earth will be filled with the knowledge of the eternal. I think that's the most astonishing picture of what could be possible if we were all filled with the knowledge of the eternal all the time.

And ultimately, if we look at Jesus' life, he is exactly that. The man who speaks words that end wickedness. The man who provides a way through oppression.

The man who offers everybody a fair hearing. Someone who will end wickedness. Who will allow a reliable and fair judgment.

[13 : 38] And we see Jesus in the struggle. In his life, we see him struggling against some of the really unjust things that happen in the world. We see Jesus standing up to unjust voices in society.

Reminding people to prioritize the poor and the weak. And healing the sick. And I guess, ultimately, following Christ's example, that's what hope looks like. It looks like us following Christ into the struggle.

Keeping our eyes on Jesus. Living a life which also seeks to end oppression. Seeks to end wickedness. Seeks to bring peace. And that means knowing that sometimes the struggle will be tough.

But we also need to trust that Christ overcame death. And offers this amazing view of the world as a better one. But it's kind of different to the view of the world most of us have today.

And for me, this makes sense of what we read in Romans 5, 3-4 about hope. Enduring suffering produces endurance. Endurance produces character.

[14 : 38] And character produces hope. That makes sense to me. Somehow, hope is the product of following Christ into the struggle. Of trying to realize the kingdom of heaven on earth.

Of trying to be like Christ. Someone who rejects wickedness and builds peace. And when I look at Christ, God present in the human world. And I look at the way the world couldn't bear him because he was God.

And he was powerful, but he wasn't powerful in the normal way. He didn't uphold the power structures which have been created since time immemorial. Which makes some people powerful by trampling on the poorest and the weakest.

Instead, Jesus as God offered us a completely alien way of being in the world. A completely new understanding of what a good life is. A Messiah riding a donkey, not a stallion.

Eating with the poor and disreputable people. Despite having invitations to dine with the cream of society. And born in a stable and not a palace. God's power never hurts people, never controls people.

[15 : 39] Like the power we see in this world. God's love and God's power was vulnerable. Which means sometimes it feels like it's being blotted out by coercive power. And yet, this vulnerable power modelled by God.

Made human in solidarity with the poorest and the weakest is our calling. That's what following Jesus, the way, the truth and the life looks like. And following Christ will not protect us.

Or make us safe from things that could hurt us. It will not make us rich. Following Christ will never make other people do what we want. But it is the right way.

Because the power God offers in God's life, God's creation. Is a way out of the cages of power structures. Of oppression that we humans build.

That make us less like the God who created us in our image. In his image. And I think this is ultimately a better story of hope. Hope is not a gift.

[16 : 37] It's not something you wake up with feeling. Hope can't be overwhelmed with struggle. Because hope starts and ends with the knowledge that Jesus, who is God, has struggled on earth like us.

And is struggling and moving the world towards what God promises it will be. A place where the lion will lie down with the lamb. A place where there is no pain, no war, no violence on God's holy mountain.

So what does this practice of hope look like in daily life? Well I guess it starts by being realistic, seeing clearly what the problems of the world are. Being alive to how violent and horrible poverty is.

Refusing to take part in status games like keeping up with the Joneses. It means watching out for the kind of people that the world tramples over every day. Because of their health, their poverty, their skin colored.

If they're disabled, their sexuality, their gender. And like Jesus, always seeking to challenge and undermine the evil power structures that put people down.

[17 : 36] And I think even when you come across something that you feel you should fight, it means not resorting to violence or violent language. Even when the alternative is words which are hard because they leave us vulnerable.

Because in the life of Jesus we see that these power structures are something God always chose to undermine. To do away with throughout history. From setting the slaves free in Egypt to letting the isolated woman at the well and not one of the disciples proclaim that he was the Messiah publicly first.

Because the vision of the world where the lion lies down with the lamb is one where all of God's creation comes together as God intended it to. So I guess you have seeing the world clearly and I think the next important step is prayer.

Honestly prayer is important because some of the problems in the world, climate change, that kind of thing, are so huge and overwhelming. And I think prayer, trying to work out where Jesus would be struggling in this world, can be a really important tool for discerning where God wants us to follow Jesus into the struggle.

Which can really put flesh on, put more direction onto what following Christ looks like in practice. And I think sometimes art is a really powerful way of doing this. So I've got a couple of examples.

[18 : 48] So I don't know if you can see this clearly, but this is a station of the cross which comes from Argentina. And it is Jesus arrested and he's surrounded by the mothers of those who were unjustly disappeared by the government.

All of those women are holding signs saying, where is my son? And that places Jesus really clearly into a modern context, reveals the injustice that Jesus probably would have experienced if he had been born in Argentina.

A second example is the parallel that James Cone, the famous black theologian, drew between the cross and the lynching tree. Which is a really interesting one because if you think about it, in many of the Gospels it just said Jesus died hanging on a tree.

And yet in South America, a lot of people looked at victims of lynching and they failed to see any of the parallels with Jesus. Which is insane when you think about it. Because it's basically they were doing the same thing to these poor men.

But they weren't willing to see Christ in the body of someone who was struggling. Or here's another really great art example, again from America. This is on the border. So I don't know if you remember when Donald Trump put all the children into cages and separated them from their parents.

[20 : 01] This is Mary, Joseph and Jesus each in their individual cage, as they would have been if they'd crossed the Mexican border at that time. And finally, you've probably seen thousands of images of Jesus as a homeless person.

Now all of these pictures remind us that Jesus was not a nice privileged person in society. And that if Jesus was born today, the struggles Jesus would face walking the world as a human would be struggles against violent oppressive governments.

Being one of the countries that bore the brunt of climate change rather than being in our privileged country where we just get a bit hotter. He'd be more likely than us to be a victim of violent racism.

And more likely to be homeless, as he was in his life, than to have a safe roof over his head. I mean, we worship a God born in a stable and killed like a common criminal after all. Now, I was going to talk about Kendrick Lamar, but I realise that that's going to take up a lot of time and probably be a distraction.

But if you'd like to ask me about it next week, I have so many thoughts. I think it's a really interesting piece of liberation theology. Maybe a bit dubious to make the crown of thorns out of diamonds, but another week, another week.

[21 : 12] Anyway, that happened at Glastonbury this year. But finally, I think it's really important that prayer doesn't just stop with prayer. I think to feel hopeful in the world at the moment, prayer needs to move you into action.

And certainly when I encounter God in prayer, God always sends me out into the world. I think following Christ, doing the works that Christ would do, as Christ said, was part of being the way, the truth and the life, means actively trying to make the world a better place.

Now that sounds really grandiose, but I think it can be simple. Love the people you're given to love well. Protest things that seem unjust.

Volunteer if you possibly can. And generally, when you meet people, try and make other people feel better rather than worse on account of meeting you.

All of those things are joining the struggle. They may not seem huge, but they make a big difference. And I would say, if you do do these things, you will end up feeling more hopeful.

[22 : 14] Because I think it is a path that leads to hope. I mean, it's one of those cliches, isn't it? If you want to lift yourself up, lift up someone else. But it is true. That's how you practically feel more hopeful on a day-to-day basis.

So hope. I think it starts with being realistic with the world, seeing clearly what the struggles are. And because of our, especially my relatively privileged perspective, there'll be some problems we can't see ourselves.

So I guess seeing clearly also means listening to other people when they say, this is a problem. And you think, I can't see why that's a problem. I find, personally, sometimes I have a really angry reaction when someone says, this is a problem, and I can't see it's a problem.

But you've got to sit on those feelings of anger and think, tell me why it's a problem. I don't understand immediately, but I'd love to. Then I think prayer comes next, discernment, imagining where Christ would be and what Christ's focus in the world would be.

And then finally, you need to take that prayer and turn it into action. Reach out to the people around you. Because that's the bit where it becomes possible to feel hopeful. Struggling in the mix helps us all aspire to a better world.

[23 : 30] And I think one of the things that's very sad today is, often when we think about our politicians, we can think, they're all like that. There's nothing that can be done. Which I think is a really sad example of giving up hope.

Whereas I think, actually, we should all be out there saying, yes, we know better people than Boris Johnson to run our country. Yes, we do. All of us do. And how can we make that happen?

I think that's what hope would look like in this current situation. So, let's pray. Loving God, sometimes this world is so hard and it can be hard to feel hopeful because of all of the traumatic things happening.

And sometimes those traumatic things can overwhelm us and take our eyes off you because you are the source of our hope. But help us not to be overwhelmed by despair.

Help us to help in whatever small way we can to build the kingdom of God, a juster, fairer, more peaceful society. And inspire us with that vision.

[24 : 34] Keep us going even when it doesn't look like the world out there. Amen. Amen.