

Hope, anchor of the soul

Sermon by Marcel Rebiai

What is hope? Why do we need hope? How can we acquire hope? How do we nurture hope? What happens when there is no hope? I don't consider it time wasted to ponder this mystery. Not only does someone who loses all hope have a poor chance of survival; God's word tells us that hope will accompany us in all eternity.

According to the great song of love in 1Cor. 13, one day all gifts and abilities will lose their meaning except love, faith and hope. These three, it says, will remain in all eternity. Therefore it is important to ask ourselves how we perceive hope, what it has to do with us and how real it is in our daily lives. There is a negative proverb, "Hoping and persevering makes one a fool." The person who coined this saying had his own concept of hope. However it is right and important to ask ourselves what this word hope really means for us. Is it more than a pious biblical phrase; is it more than a locality where my soul flees for comfort to avoid letting go of unachieved goals and desires, so that disappointment and pain do not overwhelm me? What do I associate with this term? Too often the term hope is a bit hazy for us, so we're rather surprised when Paul says that hope remains in all eternity.

As someone rightly asked me, "If we're in heaven where we know and see everything, what is there to hope for? Why this hope in heaven?" Behind this question there is also a certain concept of hope. We often say of a person, "He's my last hope" when we have to solve a problem which is beyond us. A person becomes the fulfilment of a concrete expectancy. This kind of thinking is quite biblical. In 1 Tim. 1:1 we read that Jesus Christ is our hope. Paul says that Jesus is the fulfilment of our expectancy. Hope obviously has to do with expectancy. The word expectancy contains the word "expect". If we expect something we must wait for it. Thus hope has to do with waiting for something. Must we then wait for something in heaven? Apparently so, otherwise hope would hold no eternal dimension.

The question, of course, is what we must wait for in heaven. Generally we think of "waiting" as a rather unpleasant, often tense condition. We want to put it behind us as quickly as possible in order to reach what we are expecting. No one enjoys waiting. Most of us want to have what we are expecting immediately, painlessly and if possible without cost. But we cannot avoid the fact that waiting is an aspect of our humanity. The countless recipes and strategies for gaining money and influence, in order to shorten the waiting time or to avoid it altogether, prove that waiting is an existential part of our human existence.

What actually happens when we are waiting? Does time simply slip past? Is precious time lost? Hardly, for in eternity time does not pass and there we must wait, nevertheless. In nature, waiting is a growth process and growth means that fruit is ripening. Something also grows in us when we wait, especially when we expect something. What grows depends directly on what we are waiting for or what we expect. The content and direction of the waiting process determine the fruit.

Life, longing, joy or peace do not grow automatically. Growth could be in frustration, anger or bitterness. This depends on the content of our hope, our waiting and our expectancy.

Hope and its fruits

Let us return to the term hope. In Rom. 5:5 we read, "Hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us."

The hope of which God's word speaks does not disappoint, does not prove empty, but attains its goal and brings forth its fruit. The guarantee that this hope is not going to disappoint us lies in the fact that God has poured his love into our hearts. God's hope is thus based on, anchored in and directed through his love. Love is the direction of, the reason for, and the content of biblical hope. Hope depends on love!

We are not speaking theoretically of hope, for there are unfortunately many types of hope which harm people. We need only look at history. Countless revolutions which were begun in order to create more justice and freedom started with hope and ended in frustration and new forms of slavery, misery and death. These brought hollow, inedible or even poisonous fruits. But they all began with great hope for something new.

The pivot is always the direction and the anchor of hope. "For God has poured out his love into our hearts." What, then, is my hope based on? What am I really waiting for, what do I expect? Where is my hope and my expectancy anchored?

In 1 Peter 1:3 we read, "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." We have been born again to a living hope! In other words, there are obviously dead hopes, as well. These are based not in the living God, but in man's dead spirit and in his unstable, unpredictable and unreliable soul. These dead hopes lead nowhere because their source and goal is not God himself, but rather the man who is separated from and independent of God, the man whose axis is himself.

God's word is unmistakably clear regarding fruit born of man-based hope. Jeremiah says, 17:5-6, "Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who depends on flesh (man's strength) for his strength (hope) and whose heart turns away from the Lord. He will be like a bush in the wastelands; he will not see prosperity when it comes. He will dwell in the parched places of the desert, in a salt land where no one lives." But the prophet presents us a picture of a living hope in verses 7-8, "But blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him. He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit."

If we relent in relation to our own guilty ways and accept God's judgment on the cross, we experience salvation; then God's love will be poured into our hearts for Jesus' sake. Jesus will become our hope. The roots of our being then receive access to living water which flows from God's heart; with this water we grow into a tree which produces life-creating fruit in all circumstances. We will not only have a living hope; we will become a living hope for others because he who lives in us is the hope.

Do we believe that we have a living i.e. not an empty hope and are we a hope for others if Jesus really lives in us? How tangible is the hope within us? Can people who meet us scent the water in which our roots are anchored? Can people taste the fruit which grows on our tree of life? If it is not clear to us what God's word means by fruit, we can read in Paul's letter to the Galatians (5:22-23) about "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,

gentleness and self-control."

Hope must be firmly held onto

Hope which is anchored in Jesus is a state of being. It is likewise a visible confession of commitment. Affirmation exposes our affiliation. What is my orientation? what forms me? to whom or what do I expose myself? where do I belong? All this has to do with declaration. In Hebr. 10:23 we read, "Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful." Hope is a confession of what I am hoping for, to whom I belong, whom and what I wait for.

Hope is concrete. It includes tangible promises of an inheritance and a future. As written in 1Cor. 2:9, "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him." And in Rom. 8:17-18, "Now if we are children, then we are heirs heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. For I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed to us." We should hold fast to the substance and the foundation of our hope because the guarantor of this hope is absolutely reliable and faithful!

Holding fast is an active deed and an attitude. In this world, the devil and his cronies attempt to steal whatever we do not purposely hold fast. The devil does not respect others' possessions; for he is a thief, a liar and a murderer. Therefore Jesus calls to us in Rev. 3:11, "I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown."

As I already said, the content of our hope, what we may expect, is beyond the range and understanding of every human concept because it is anchored in God's heart. Only God can guarantee such a hope, for it is nothing less than transformation into Jesus' image, his being, his love and humility, his beauty and glory. For in 1 John 3:2-3 it is written, "We shall be like him. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure."

Hope is nourished by God's word

Our hope must not only be declared and firmly held onto, but also purified and nourished. What nourishes my hope? In Romans 15:4 we read, "It was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." So hope comes from endurance (holding fast) and through encouragement, i.e. through confidence and trust in God's promises. Some Scripture passages show us how God's word builds hope in us, fills it with content and directs it toward fulfilment.

1 Tim. 4:10 articulates the foundation of hope, "We have put our hope in the living God." In 1 Pet. 1:13 God's word calls to us, "Be self-controlled and set your hope fully on the grace ...in Jesus!", for "Jesus Christ is our hope" (1 Tim. 1:1). Therefore we should set our hope exclusively on his grace. The prophet Jeremiah says to God in 17:14, "For you are my hope" [German Jerusalem Bible].

If Jesus, who is the hope of glory, really lives in us then we are living exhibits of hope. Then Peter's words are valid and make sense, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (1 Pet. 3:15).

Always be ready for responsibility! People should be able to demand an account from us for the hope which lives in us. "For you are my hope." If Jesus has filled our lives with hope, we

will become filling stations for those who seek hope. People who are searching for hope should be able to fill up on it from our lives. Not because we know all the answers, but because the living God dwells in us with his promises! Because Jesus is the content and goal of all hope, God's word is also saturated by this theme. One could say that hope breathes from every page of the Bible.

We will now concentrate on the following verses: "By two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we... may be greatly encouraged" (Hebr. 6:18-19). The two things are that God has given us his promises and that he has even confirmed them with an oath in his own name. Further in Hebrews, "...we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged. We have this hope as an anchor for the soul." Let each person look at his own soul when it is shaken by storms or driven off course by waves of this world's events, emotions, opinions and fears!

Our text shows that we all need an anchor so that we won't be torn loose and drift off course. "We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain."

What is the anchor for our souls? Hope. If our soul is torn loose by a storm and drifts helplessly, it does not require much intelligence to see that it has been anchored insecurely. The anchor has not been lowered sufficiently. In other words, there was no hope. This is how central hope is. Our soul is secured by hope! In our daily lives hope is crucial: in our relationship with ourselves, with Jesus, with people around us; in regard to our commission, our calling and work. Our soul is padlocked in this reality of hope.

Our hope is an anchor which is secured behind the curtain. In the tabernacle, the most holy place was there. It was the place of God's presence. Only the high priest could enter it, once a year. The tabernacle included the throne of grace with the mercy seat, where God revealed himself to his people.

Without going into further details about the sanctuary, I want to emphasize one thought regarding hope. The throne of grace is the place of forgiveness and daily new beginnings with myself and my neighbour. By God's mercy, no guilt is so great that it cannot be forgiven; no wound so great that it cannot be healed; no life so broken that it cannot be restored.

Whoever receives God's mercy daily in Jesus can know that "if God is for us (and in Jesus, God is absolutely for us!) , who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all (for salvation) how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" (Rom. 8:31-32).

"Everything" means life, peace, freedom, joy and an indestructible future. When life's storms break over me with illness, problems, danger and finally death, I who have anchored my soul to God's throne of grace can say, "The Lord is my light and my salvation whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life of whom shall I be afraid?" (Ps. 27:1).

If my soul is anchored behind the curtain, I will know God's care daily. He will say to me, "I know what thoughts I have about you, namely thoughts of salvation, to give a future to you and not only you, but to each one who turns to me in trust. You have no reason for fear, resignation or discouragement. I am totally for you and will never abandon you until I have fulfilled everything I have promised."

God is absolutely reliable; in him there is nothing false. If we expose ourselves daily to this truth and fill our hearts, our minds and our intentions with it, God's kingdom will become increasingly real and eternal fruits will ripen.

We said that hope is eternal because it has to do with Jesus himself. Hope is founded on God's being. Hope is the reality which aligns me with God. I can know that God always has an answer to what I don't see or understand at any given moment. Hope is the eternally open door which initiates my future. Hope is the reality that Jesus is the Yes and Amen to all God's promises in his word. Every promise which was ever given must one day be fulfilled. Through the channel of hope, God's promises flow into my life and the lives of others.

Hope as the basis of faith

Some people may ask what the difference is between hope and faith. Faith simply cannot exist without hope. Heb. 11:1 explains the relationship between hope and faith. "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." Thus hope is a basis of faith. Whoever cannot hope cannot have faith, because he has nothing to cling to or expect. Where there is hope there is faith: faith cements hope.

No faith can exist without hope. If there is no hope, what then should we believe? Hope is so central because it keeps our eyes fixed on God's promises for ourselves and for this world, so that we can hold fast to them in faith. God is good, God is here, God knows about my situation; if I bring it to him and entrust myself to him, he will act. God will come in his time, which is never too late! The devil has been overcome and his machinations will be destroyed. Jesus will return soon and there will be no more pain, misery or need. This is no cheap comfort, but a hope oriented by God's word, to which we must cling in faith!

Yes, many Moslems will find Jesus and enter God's kingdom. The people of Israel will recognize Jesus as their messiah and king, thus filling God's joy. This is justified faith! Why? Because Jesus is the guarantor and he himself is the hope. Therefore it is written, "Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful"(Hebr. 10:23).

Holding on unswervingly means that we continually apply God's promises and remind God of them daily. The psalmist is a model for us. Whenever he began to lose his grip he didn't simply give up, but reminded God and himself of his promises. "Remember your word to your servant, for you have given me hope" (Ps. 119:49). Lord, remember your word! That is hope. Hope says to God, "You are God and I am stand-ing before you because there is nothing else. I am waiting until you come, God. And you will come."

That is why hoping and persevering are so closely related. Hope is the decisive attitude of my heart. It is the direction of my thought and will; it is the awareness that God's kingdom will penetrate every circumstance, that victory will eventuate. Of Jesus it is said, "A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice" (Is. 42:3). He will bring forth justice for everyone and it will be God's justice. Jesus is the guarantor. That is hope!

The question is whether we do hold fast to it. If I have this hope for my life, the devil can buffet me from left and right as much as he wants. What is anchored is anchored. Even if the waves are great, I can say with Paul, "I know whom I trust." Have hope and be hope. Do I have hope? Am I a real hope in all my relationships? Do I believe that God's promises will reach his purpose in my life and in those around me? There is really only one hopeless case:

the devil. But for God, no human is a hopeless case. Even when we reach the end of our tether, we must remain convinced that for God there is no hopeless case because hope has to do with his character. He himself is hope. Therefore hope is eternal. And I will hope in all eternity because I am growing deeper and deeper into God's being; I will know his salvation and he himself eternally deeper and better.

Our hope is that we will be transformed into Jesus' image. This will never be completed! If the transformation of our hearts ended when we died, that would be insufficient. Thank God that he has other purposes for us. God is endless and so I, too, will endlessly grow into the character of his son. That is my personal hope. I will invest and attempt everything in order to grow into Jesus' image on this earth. This is a very special time. But my hope is that the transformation will continue beyond my earthly life.

I repeat: The anchor for our soul is our hope in relation to God's promises for us, for our friends, our congregations and families. People with solid hope are people with a big heart and a broad horizon. People with hope expect much from God. One cannot have hope and yet remain narrow-minded or lack joy and peace.

I want to encourage all of us to expose ourselves to this reality of hope and to cling to the confession of hope. For we know: Hope does not disappoint us because it has to do with God and with his character. The content of this hope is the love of God. Amen.

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