

ALL MY HOPE

Meditations for Advent

Peter Sills

*These meditations, inspired by the hymn
All My Hope on God is Founded,
were given in Advent 2009
at St Margaret's Church, Ditchling.*

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All my hope on God is founded;
he doth still my trust renew,
me through change and chance he guideth,
only good and only true.
God unknown,
he alone
calls my heart to be his own.

Pride of man and earthly glory,
sword and crown betray his trust;
what with care and toil he buildeth,
tower and temple fall to dust.
But God's power,
hour by hour,
is my temple and my tower.

God's great goodness aye endureth,
deep his wisdom, passing thought:
splendour, light and life attend him,
beauty springeth out of naught.
Evermore
from his store
new-born worlds rise and adore.

Daily doth the almighty Giver
bounteous gifts on us bestow;
his desire our soul delighteth,
pleasure leads us where we go.
Love doth stand
at his hand;
joy doth wait on his command.

Still from man to God eternal
sacrifice of praise be done,
high above all praises praising
for the gift of Christ, his Son.
Christ doth call
one and all:
ye who follow shall not fall.

*Words: Robert Bridges (1844-1930);
based on the German on Joachim Neander (1650-1680)*

I

All My Hope On God?

*All my hope on God is founded;
he doth still my trust renew.*

To be human is to hope. St Paul believed that hope was one of the three things which last for ever (1 Cor 13.13), and echoing him, Alexander Pope said that hope springs eternal in the human breast. But what is hope? Hope is more than just wishing that things will turn out well, like hoping for a fine day. Hope is more than optimism. Optimism is a determination to look on the bright side, entertaining only the possibility of success. Hope takes the world as it is, with its possibilities of failure and defeat, and affirms that even so there are possibilities of good that are worth striving for. Hope is powerful inner force and not just a superficial brightness. John Macquarrie says 'hope is the faith that when man falls and even when the worst evils happen in this ambiguous world, we never find ourselves at the end of the road. The creator God is ahead of us, waiting to open up a new possibility.' (*Christian Hope*)

Hope goes before us and calls us to follow; hope enables us to transcend ourselves in striving for the good; hope keeps us going even if the outlook is not optimistic. Hope sustains those who work for peace in Palestine, or for action to combat climate change; hope drives those who seek cures for incurable illnesses; hope keeps love alive in family conflict and betrayal. *Me through change and chance he guideth, only good and only true.* Hope gives life.

Hope is powerful stuff; and because it is powerful we need to be careful about on what or on whom we pin our hopes. This is one of the central messages of the Bible. The story of Israel is the story of a people led on by hope. Just what this meant came home to me when I made the pilgrimage to Sinai and Jordan in the footsteps of Moses. The

Israelites left Egypt believing that they would soon occupy a new homeland. The journey actually took forty years, and by the end of it most of those who set out with Moses had died; it was their children who entered the promised land. Many were the times they wished they had never begun and turned against Moses, putting their hope on other things like the golden calf. According to the Bible, it was because they did this that the journey took so long and most of them failed to reach their goal. But Moses kept going. His hope was on God. He hoped that despite all the setbacks and suffering God would be true to his promise and bring them to their promised land. In the same way the great prophets like Isaiah looked forward to the day when all peoples would seek the Lord to learn his ways and walk in his paths:

In the days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, 'Come let us go up to the mountain of the Lord...that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.

Isaiah 2.2,3.

The religion of Israel is a religion of hope; its message is that those who place their hope on God will find their hope fulfilled.

Where do we place our hope? Do we place our hope on God, seeking his ways, walking in his paths? Or do we place our hopes on material things, or on other people?

Its an important question because in today's world the things which renewed our hope seem themselves under siege – the family, marriage, employment, the welfare state, common values – so much so that it is difficult to describe our world today as hopeful. The last century was marked by false hopes on a grand scale. Fascism, communism, liberalism, science, and the free market have all been looked to as the harbingers of the new age. They have all been found wanting.

Fascism and communism offered a collective utopia but denied individual freedom; liberalism offered individual freedom but has eroded common values and social bonds; science has turned out not to have all the answers, partly because it has chosen to deal only with the material and to ignore the spiritual; and the free-market is basically anarchic, a mechanism which lacks any notion of justice, enriching the rich and impoverishing the poor. All these hopes have been found wanting because, like the Israelites in the wilderness, they have tried to do without God. The result has been death, not life: a death of the spirit, an inner decay. When the historian Edward Gibbon wrote about the end of the Roman Empire he concluded that it had decayed from within; it is the same with our society today. False hopes have produced an inner decay.

All my hope in God is founded we sing, but is it? Yes and No. Have we not all been seduced by false hopes, putting our security in the gods of the age and their false promises – like the invitation of the bankers to extend our credit, which actually means getting deeper into debt? And yet we keep on hoping. We all feel in our hearts something of the aimlessness and futility of modern life, the emptiness of the promises of the advertisers, the politicians and the bankers, but in spite of it all we continue to affirm that there are possibilities of good that are worth striving for. This is a sign of God's presence in our lives: *He doth still my trust renew.*

'Hope springs eternal in the human breast.' We know we have been deluded, but at the same time we have a deep spiritual thirst; and, however we name him, we know that God alone offers our only hope: *God Unknown, He alone calls my heart to be his own.* What keeps me going is my conviction that God offers a better hope than the gods of the age. He alone offers a view of life which enables us to value both individual freedom and collective needs, and the inner strength to keep the one from dominating the other; he alone gives us the moral resources to contain the operation of the free market so that with justice and generosity it serves the common good; he alone helps us to connect

science with the Spirit so it works to enhance our humanity and not to destroy it. God alone can hold our hopes and fulfil them; he is our true security.

In Advent God calls us to forsake the false hopes of the world and to place all our hope in him alone.

*All my hope on God is founded;
He doth still my trust renew.
Me through change and chance he guideth,
Only good and only true.
God unknown,
He alone
Calls my heart to be his own.*

II

All My Life For God?

*Pride of man and earthly glory,
Sword and crown betray his trust...*

If to be human is to hope, to be human is also to have faith. But what is faith? The author of the Letter to Hebrews says 'faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.' (Heb. 11.1) He writes of the heroes of faith like Noah, Abraham and Moses; they were men of faith not only because they had an unshakeable inner conviction that God was with them, but more particularly because they acted on the basis that their faith was true: they took practical steps in faith to make their hopes come true. If hope takes the world as it is,

with its possibilities of failure and defeat, and affirms that even so there are possibilities of good which are worth striving for, then faith is the practical action in the world which must follow if our striving is to be real. To have faith in someone is to follow where they lead, so if our faith in God is real we must follow where he leads, offering ourselves in his service. If we want God to fill us with all his hope, then, in faith, we must offer him all our life: *But God's power, hour by hour, is my temple and my tower.*

The feast of St Nicholas (December 6th) comes at the beginning of Advent, and in some countries it is the traditional start of the Christmas season. One of the reasons we give gifts at Christmas is because of the example of St Nicholas who provided generously for the poor and the needy. His generosity gave substance to his faith. He gave not just because he was moved by the plight of the needy, but also because he accepted that his faith in God would be worthless if he failed to do unto others as God had done unto him. Nicholas lived at the time when the Roman Empire was beginning to crack apart. The strain of keeping such a vast domain together was beginning to show, and the idealism which had motivated its peoples was almost spent. Barbarian hordes attacked repeatedly, laying large areas to waste, destroying crops, and killing thousands of people. It was a time of political uncertainty and social disorder, the state religion had lost its power, morals were lax and inflation was rife – made worse by currency speculation. The result was, as now, a faithless age, without hope, and groping for direction. *Pride of man and earthly glory, sword and crown betray his trust. What with care and toil he buildeth, tower and temple, fall to dust.*

Into this situation Christianity offered something new: an understanding of God as love, which not only fulfilled men's deepest spiritual needs but also held the key to overcoming all social evils. Here was the incredible good news that God loved his people so much that he had come among them as a man to teach and to heal, and in the end to offer himself for them in forgiveness. Here was a God in whom people could really have faith. The power of this message was seen in

the small communities, like the one led by St Nicholas, who lived their lives by this faith. They met the world as it was with its possibilities of failure and defeat, and yet affirmed that there were possibilities of good which were worth striving for, and they acted accordingly. All their hope was on God because, through faith, all their lives were lived for God.

The great hope that Jesus sets before us is that God's kingdom might come on earth as in heaven: the kingdom is what comes to pass when we let God's power be our temple and our tower. But the word 'kingdom' is misleading. The hope of the kingdom is not for the establishment of a state, like the United Kingdom, a static concept, but for something dynamic, namely that the kingly rule of God might direct our lives. When Jesus taught about the kingdom he used dynamic images: farmers sowing, seeds growing, people searching, harvesters reaping, fishermen fishing. These are pictures of growth and change, challenge and fulfilment, in a word, of transformation. So the hope of the coming of the kingdom is for the transformation of the world so that we experience the kingly rule of God on earth as in heaven.

What might God's kingly rule be like? We need look no further than Jesus; he is the embodiment of God's kingly rule. He transformed the picture of God common in Israel, teaching that God was a loving father, and his ministry offered a new relationship between God and his people. In public life and in private life, before God and with men, Jesus transformed the relationships of those around him. In the same way, the acts of faith through which we affirm our hopes and offer our lives to God, are those which also seek a transformation of relationships, including our own. Do we find it hard to see God as a loving father. If so our prayer for the kingdom asks for a deeper experience of his love. Do we condemn those who sin, over-looking our own sinfulness? If so, our prayer for the kingdom asks that we become more merciful and less hypocritical. Do we like to keep ourselves to ourselves, looking down on the poor and those who haven't quite made it? If so, our prayer for the kingdom asks God to soften our hearts

with his compassion. Do we fear and mistrust those from different races and cultures? If so, our prayer for the kingdom asks God to help us rejoice in the diversity and gifts of all his peoples. So God's power becomes our temple and our tower.

Jesus used several images to describe the growth of the kingdom, one of them was the seed growing secretly: 'A man scatters seed on the ground; he goes to bed at night and gets up in the morning, and meanwhile the seed sprouts and grows – how, he does not know. The ground produces a crop by itself...' (Mark 4.26-28) Here Jesus describes a process of change and growth which the farmer begins, but in which thereafter he plays no essential part. The seed and the soil contain within them the qualities that bring forth growth as the seed is transformed into the full plant. In the same way God plants the desire for the kingdom in our hearts, he gives us personal qualities which, if allowed to grow, will transform our lives and touch those around us and the world in which we live.

In other images the human role is more active, like a man looking for buried treasure or a merchant looking for fine pearls (Matthew 13.44-46). Here we see the importance of persistence in desire for the kingly rule of God, and the way our personal skills, for example, the merchant's ability to recognise a fine pearl, are part of our endowment in working for its realisation. And when we do respond to God in this way, he gives the increase. Our work is like planting a mustard seed, one of the smallest of seeds, but which grows into a bush big enough for birds to rest in its branches (Mark 4.30-32). In Jesus' ministry, we might say, God's kingly rule was present in a germinal rather than a finished form, and it seems that God waits upon our co-operation in bringing it to its fullness. So, when Jesus was asked when the kingdom of God would come, he replied, 'You cannot tell by observation when the kingdom of God comes. There will be no saying, "Look, here it is!, or "there it is!"; for in fact the kingdom of God is among you.' (Luke 17.20,21) In effect he was saying, you see kingly rule of God in me, and

through me you have access to the grace and the power to realise it more fully.

In Advent God calls us to live by faith in him, opening ourselves to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit so that his kingly rule is enthroned in our heart.

*Pride of man and earthly glory,
Sword and crown betray his trust;
What with care and toil he buildeth,
Tower and temple, fall to dust;
But God's power,
hour by hour,
Is my temple and my tower.*

III

All My Love from God?

*God's great goodness ay endureth,
Deep his wisdom, passing thought...*

If to be human is to hope and to have faith, to be human is, above all, to love. But what is love? When St Paul wrote about love he used the Greek word *agape*, which means self-giving with no thought for oneself. If hope takes the world as it is, with its possibilities of failure and defeat, and yet affirms that even so there are possibilities of good which are worth striving for, and if faith is the practical action through which our striving is expressed, then love is what makes that striving possible. St Paul chose the word *agape* because it best describes the love we see in Jesus, the love which gives life. To love is to offer someone

your life that they might have life. This is the love we strive to give to God and to the world. Love is not simply a feeling or an emotion; love is also an act of the will, a desire and a determination to model our lives on Jesus and to receive his strength and his wisdom.

Faith, hope and love: these three, said St Paul, last for ever. They are sometimes described as the three theological virtues. What is virtue? We don't hear much about virtue these days; people speak more about values, but the two are not the same. Virtue is an inner quality, a grace, that enables us to live a life that is morally good, and beyond that, virtue enables a life that is lived for others out of love. Values tend to be a matter of personal or corporate choice: values come from *me*; but virtue has something given about it: virtue comes from *God*. In Jesus virtue becomes agape, the love of God, and if we want to place all our hope on God, and to live all our life for him, we must be open to receive all our love from him. *Love doth stand at his hand; joy doth wait on his command.*

We see this, of course, in the ministry of Jesus: all his virtue, all his love, came from God. Henri Nouwen, writing about the Temptations of Jesus, points out that Satan tempted Jesus to choose the values of the world: give the people what they want – turn these stones into bread; put on a good show – throw yourself down from the pinnacle of the Temple; take power – put your faith in me. Jesus rejected these temptations, choosing instead to depend only on the truth and power of God. He said to his tempter: 'Away with you, Satan! for it is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."' (Matt. 4.10) Satan tempted Jesus to choose the values of materialism, prestige and power, which would make him look impressive in the eyes of the world; Jesus chose the way of love.

The way of love poses a real challenge to the ways of the world, and we're all caught up in this conflict. *Daily doth the almighty giver bounteous gifts on us bestow*: the natural creation, for example, or our human talents and skills, but we haven't cared for the creation nor used our talents and skills to serve the common good, as the banking crisis

shockingly reminds us. The way we allocate both material and financial resources is based on power, not on need – as the law of God requires. The OT has much to say about God’s special concern for the poor, the widow, and the stranger, and its economic laws seek to incarnate the principle of love for one’s neighbour in everyday life.

Bishop Simon Phipps suggested that in economic life love means taking everyone’s interests seriously. It does not take much imagination to appreciate the deep inner change required if the economically powerful are to take seriously the interests of the economically powerless. Such a transformation of outlook would be profound; the poor would no longer be regarded as a problem to be dealt with but as brothers and sisters upon whose fate our own salvation depends. This seems to be the message of the parable of the Good Samaritan. Our neighbour, Jesus said, is anyone in need. It is the fact of need, and that alone, that puts a claim on our love; we cannot pass by on the other side because they are not like us. It is those who are weak in the eyes of the world – the poor, the widow and the stranger – whom God commends to our special concern. This requires a deliberate, willed love; it is the work of virtue.

His desire our soul delighteth, pleasure leads us where we go. But it is not his desire that delights our souls, but our own, and it is our own pleasures that have led us not the pleasures of God. Rather than place all our hope on God we have placed it on prosperity and have chosen our values accordingly. In this situation God is calling us to recover virtue. It is not just a matter of choosing so-called Christian values, but of receiving from God the wisdom and strength to live out those values in the world. This is challenging because it means coming to see the world with God’s eyes, and when we do see things through his eyes, amazing things can happen. The Jubilee 2000 campaign for the remission of the debts of the world’s poorest nations was an impressive example of the Church challenging the world with God’s agenda. The limited results so far obtained show just how hard the task is, but they also show how worthwhile it is. In Uganda, for example, the remission

of debts has released funds that enable thousands of children to have access to education and health care that were formerly denied. When love gets a chance relationships are transformed: *Beauty springeth out of naught. Evermore from his store new-born worlds rise and adore.*

In Advent God calls us to receive all our love from him, to love as he loves, to look on the world with his eyes. Only thus will all our faith be in him, and all our hope be on him.

*Daily doth the almighty giver
Bounteous gifts on us bestow;
His desire our soul delighteth,
Pleasure leads us where we go.
Love doth stand
At his hand;
Joy doth wait on his command.*

IV

All My God in Christ?

*Still from man to god eternal
Sacrifice of praise be done...*

To be human is to live in hope, in faith, and in love. These are the three basic Christian virtues; how are we to enthrone them in our lives? If you asked St Paul, he would probably reply: 'By letting God do it for you. If you *really* want to put all your hope on him, live all your life for him, and receive all your love from him, you must give him space to make it happen.' We tend to be fearful about letting God into our lives, anxious about where he might take us. But developing a real

relationship with him is what we are made for, as St Augustine said: 'Thou hast made us, O Lord, for thyself and our hearts are restless till they rest in thee.' And we shall find that he takes no further than our true selves.

In our day-to-day lives it is our relationships which sustain us, especially our relationships of love; it is the same with our faith. It is by building a personal relationship with God that our faith will grow strong enough to keep us going. Relationships of love, especially marriage, are one of the main pictures the Bible uses to teach about God. A loving relationship is one where we take another person on trust, believing in them before we know all about them; walking with them even though we do not know where the journey will end. Marriage is founded on an open-ended commitment because that is the only way to build a deep relationship, and it is a deep relationship we were made to have with God: learning to live in a personal relationship with God is what life is really all about.

Developing a personal relationship with God may mean thinking again about what being a Christian means for us. 'To be a Christian', said Michael Ramsay, 'does not mean being "on the side of" Christianity, like one who supports a movement or approves of a cause. It means the submission of self to Christ, and the sharing of the life of his family.'

Submission and sharing are strong words, and will require personal change. One of those changes is likely to be in our view of God. God sent Jesus so that we would know what he, God, was like. The Letter to Hebrews describes him as the divine image, the stamp of God's being; Bishop John Robinson described him as 'the human face of God', and Michael Ramsay said that in God 'there is no un-Christlikeness.' So, one aspect of our personal relationship with him will be adjusting our values and our outlook on the world so that they become the same as his. All our God must be in Christ. *High above all praises praising for the gift of Christ his Son.*

Jesus' revelation of God involved a challenge to the accepted ideas of his day. He taught that God is a God of love, not vengeance; his love is for all peoples, and not just for Israel. Similarly, our ideas may be challenged if all our God is to be in Christ. At one level this may mean looking at our moral and political values and measuring them against Jesus' values. At another level it may mean moving away from a view of Jesus simply as a moral teacher and coming to a deeper understanding of the meaning of his death.

It is his death that is the foundation of our personal relationship with God. As we affirm when we sing, *Once for favoured sinners slain*, he died for us, and not just for 'us' in a general sort of way, but for *you* and *me* personally. Jesus shows us that at the heart of God there is not just self-giving but self-sacrifice. The love of God is a forgiving love; its a love that overcomes the barriers in relationships which cause them to go wrong and fall apart. This is what we call reconciliation. Jesus reconciled us to God. His death was life-giving.

St Paul is perhaps the best example of this. When he saw the light as he travelled to Damascus, he saw that Christ was everything, so much so that he counted all his achievements – education, birth, status, heritage – as so much refuse compared with his relationship with Christ. As this relationship grew he came to see Jesus as both the power of God and the wisdom of God, the one who gives life true meaning and purpose. St Paul's own faith, hope and love were so strong because he knew that he was forgiven. This is the secret of the Christian life: not that we are right; not that we are moral; but that we are forgiven. It is the fact that God loves us even unto death, which gives us hope, warms our love, and strengthens our faith. If all our hope is to be on God, all our God must be in Christ.

How do we make space in our hearts for God? How do we receive his forgiveness? It really is as simple as just wanting to, *really* wanting to, like the merchant who sold all he had to buy the pearl beyond price. The wanting is the way we experience God's call to follow him: *Christ doth call one and all*. The wanting creates the space in our hearts, and

God will fill it; he can be trusted: *Ye who follow shall not fall*. But we have to be sure that we want to follow his call, because although a personal relationship with God brings security, it also brings challenge. His demand for an open-ended, self-sacrificing commitment, and his concern for the poor and the outcast, go against the grain of modern society, based as it is on a calculating, maximising, individualistic spirit. But Jesus offers us some-thing which the gods of the age cannot, whether they be money, status, pleasure, political creeds or technological progress: Jesus offers us deep personal happiness and fulfilment, a relationship of love which will never fall apart:

Behold, I make all things new. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give the water of life without price. I will be his God and he will be my son.

Revelation 21.5-7 In Advent God

calls us to renew our personal relationship with Jesus, letting all our God be in Christ.

*Still from man to God eternal
Sacrifice of praise be done,
High above all praises praising
For the gift of Christ his Son.
Christ doth call
One and all;
Ye who follow shall not fall.*
