

Hope and Home

Sermon adapted from the Bible Society 'Bible Series' by Andrew Ollerton

Welcome to the final part of our Bible Series, thinking about 'hope' and our ultimate home. We humans are hope-oriented creatures. Without the prospect of a future worth living for, we lose the will to live. But hope is a powerful force. It can motivate us to live bold, generous and confident lives.

Today we reach the end of the Bible - the book of Revelation. For all of the strange visions and peculiar symbolism in the book, Revelation ultimately gives us a glimpse of a far horizon. Imagine us standing where we are now; of course there is a near horizon which is life in this world - the next few months and years - all of the challenges and uncertainties and threats, but there is also a far horizon, where we see a great hope. That hope shines back to give us light and encouragement and confidence in the middle of the challenges of life.

The far horizon is the hope we have for eternity. A sure and certain, a glorious hope beyond this life. Now, before we look together at something of that revelation of what lies on that far horizon, we should address an objection that many people will have. Name, how do we know? I mean how *could* we know? We've not been to the far horizon, so how could we know what's going to

be there beyond death? No one seems to come back from the far horizon to tell us what lies beyond death! So how do we know? Isn't this all just speculation like Dante's comedy or some sitcom about the afterlife? How can we know? Well the answer the Bible gives is we know what's coming *ahead* of us because of an event that has happened *behind* us in history. Listen to the way 1 Peter puts it. It says "we have been born again into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead". The living hope that we have is based on the resurrection of Jesus that has already happened. Around April, 30 AD, Jesus Christ was brutally crucified on a roman cross. He was properly dead and buried on Friday. But on Sunday - Easter Sunday as we now celebrate it - resurrection life infused that corpse of Christ and he came to life again and triumphed over death. This hope of resurrection then is embodied in Jesus Christ. If you like, the future has already happened in the past. The moment of the resurrection is the future of our human story if we are in Jesus Christ.

And notice this is resurrection. It's not resuscitation - it's resurrection. This wasn't just someone who was very ill and then made a remarkable recovery only to die again. No. Jesus properly died but he broke through death. He went beyond death and out the other side, never to die again, now reigning in a human body that is no longer susceptible to disease or sickness or illness or death. Jesus Christ then, if you like, is the first human to make

it to that far horizon. He is our future. He is the far horizon in person. And so our confidence about what lies ahead of us is because behind us in history Jesus Christ has broken the power of death and shown us the way forward. So we can be certain, confident in this hope; it's not just wishful thinking.

Here's how one other verse in the New Testament in Hebrews 6 - it simply puts it this way: "We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure." An anchor is important for boats, but it is also an important part of mountain climbing and rock climbing. Think of it like a team of rock climbers arriving at the foot of a cliff face. One of the team, the lead climber, takes on the cliff face on behalf of the whole team. All the hopes are vested in this lead climber. If they make it to the top they set up what's known as an anchor or a belay point. They fasten the rope to the rock, and then the rest of the team can climb up behind them but now they are roped to the one who's already made it. They're going where he's already gone. He's bringing them up to his position. That's how the Bible thinks of our hope. When we put our faith in Jesus Christ it's like we get clipped in, roped to him. He has already made it to the far horizon and he is bringing us to where he is - resurrection hope. We may slip, but roped to Jesus, he will not let us fall. He's bringing us to glory.

Now one of the things that every climber loves is called 'topping out'. It's where having faced the challenge of

the cliff face, your head then pops up over the horizon for the first time and you see the destiny you've been going for. What a moment it will be for us human beings when we 'top out' from the challenges and threats of this life and into the glorious hope of eternity, when we see Jesus Christ face to face. We're told in the Bible it's not just that when we see him we will be with him, we're told that when we see him we will be like him. We will enter into his state of being; his quality of resurrection life will become ours. Jesus Christ is our future.

Now in the book of Revelation we get some glimpses of what this 'topping out' into the far horizon hope will be like. Just listen to some of what we've got to look forward to as we put our trust in Jesus.

Revelation 21: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold the dwelling place of God is with humans. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more. Neither will there be mourning, or crying, or pain. For the former things have passed away'".

And then Revelation 22: "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life as bright as crystal flowing from the throne of God and of the lamb through the middle

of the street of the city. Also on either side of the river the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations."

Here we get a glimpse of that far horizon from where we are in history. We glimpse the hope of eternity and we see three things.

Firstly, a renewed planet. Did you notice that we see not just people wafting around like ghosts in clouds. No. John says "I saw a new earth." We know what earth is like: it's the planet where we live: home! But John says I saw a new home - a new earth - and it's been washed clean of all that breaks it and defiles it and now it's flourishing in the way that was always intended. He saw a new earth and he even saw the tree of life. Did you notice that? The tree of life reappears. We've only seen that in Genesis back in our origins, where we started this series. And then we lost access to that symbol of perfection. But now it's back; as if to say our human story started in a beautiful world filled with the goodness of God, and despite all the chaos in the middle it's going to finish back in a beautiful world. The tree of life and the tree of life regained; paradise lost, paradise regained. The Bible finishes with a hope: that this planet will be renewed and that society and nature - humans and animals - we will dwell in one sustainable glorious ecosystem forever. A renewed planet.

Secondly, we see resurrection bodies. Did you notice John says in his vision 'God spoke and said "He will wipe away every tear. There'll be no more crying or mourning or pain, for the old order has passed away." ' We're so used to these frail bodies of ours catching diseases and getting sick and becoming injured and becoming frail and having disabilities. And we're so used to this, we think it's normal. It's not normal and it's not the future for those who are in Christ Jesus. No. Resurrection bodies will mean we get a new body that is no longer corruptible, won't die, and won't get sick? There'll be no need to cry anymore. Our bodies will be like that of the body of Jesus who in his resurrection appearances ate fish with his friends and walked down the road with other friends and showed us a glorious, physical future.

Whatever your physical body is like now you have the hope in Jesus of a new body - a resurrection body. Even if you are gym-toned and ripped and fit right now, don't get proud in the body you've got; it'll still get sick and die! And if you're living in a frail body and you feel like your best years are behind you, don't despair. If you've put your faith in Jesus, the reality is that your best days lie *ahead* of you. One day you will no longer be a shadow of your former self. In fact, right now you're just the shadow of your *future* self! Your best days lie ahead of you: a resurrection body.

So we see a renewed planet, and resurrection bodies. And thirdly we see and look forward to reunion with

God and with his people. Did you notice in the passage it says that God will dwell with humans? Right now we can have a relationship with God but he can still seem quite distant at times. It's hard to hear his voice and know exactly how to live his way, but that will change. One day we will be so close to God there'll be no separation or division. In fact the whole earth will be – as described in Revelation – the temple. In other words the home of God, the temple, is now the whole earth. We will live in a shared space with God in total proximity with him and with his people.

That is what we will 'top out' into in glory. That is our future hope. What a hope we have to look forward to! Can you imagine what it will be like to enter into it. I think one of the best attempts to sum this up comes from CS Lewis in his book 'The Last Battle'. He pictures creatures arriving in this ultimate world. And what he says is this: "It was the unicorn who summed up what everyone was feeling. He stamped his right forehoof on the ground and neighed and cried 'I have come home at last! This is my real country. I belong here. This is the land I've been looking for all my life, though I never knew it 'till now. The reason why we love the Old Narnia is that sometimes it looked a bit like this.' " We will neigh and sigh and dance and celebrate in that new creation. And that's our hope secured in the resurrection of Jesus and this is the hope that can get us through the tough times of life. This hope anchors our

small fragile lives to a better story and gives us a security when we face loss and tragedy.

The far horizon hope shines back to this near horizon and gives us the resources we need to live bold and generous lives. Hope gives us the confidence we need in the face of life's uncertainties.

One of the challenges of is not knowing what's around the next corner. Fear of the future can rob us of peace and joy in the present. If we think that this life is all we have, we can become over-anxious and risk-averse and fearing the worst, fearing that, well, you only live once, and then the fear of missing out kicks in, and we fear that we won't get all of the things on our bucket list done before we kick the bucket. Or we won't marry the prince and live in the castle and have the dream. We could end up worrying about ourselves and selfishly only looking after our own pile, and trying to get as much pleasure as we can, and eking out our existence.

But hope says actually this life is not all that you've got. Ultimately our home lies on that far horizon, and with faith in Jesus Christ that's where we're going, roped to him. We can break out of those small horizons to say, look if God has my ultimate future secured, I can live a bold generous life in the present. So we can live secure lives knowing that whatever happens here and now, nothing can ultimately snatch away our hope. Whether you get the grades, or miss out on that place. Whether

the boss calls you in to offer you a promotion or say it's redundancy. Whether the test results say it's benign or malignant, we have a hope that is bigger than all of those uncertainties. As the New Testament verse that we read earlier puts it, "We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure."

The coronavirus pandemic has created all sorts of challenges for us. But maybe it has also created an opportunity to witness to our Christian hope. In the book 'The Rise of Christianity', the author Rodney Stark argues that early Christianity flourished precisely when the plagues came in the ancient world, because when the plagues came and everyone else fled it was the Christians with this hope who moved into the danger areas and cared for the sick and the dying, risking their own lives, secure in the hope that they had. You know the truth is when we have hope on that far horizon we become even more useful and generous and transformative here and now. Christians with hope can do extraordinary things and change the world: ending oppression, speaking out for justice, caring for the sick and dying. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu put it "I'm not an optimist, but I am a prisoner of hope." If we're Christians we're prisoners of hope; we cannot believe anything but the best for the ultimate outcome of this human story, our world. We cannot give up on this world, we won't write anyone off in it, because we're

people with hope, and that inspires us to live bold, big, generous lives until Christ returns.

As we come to the end of our Bible Series we remind ourselves that we are still caught up in the middle of the story. We have a part to play today, and we need to be inspired by this hope to make every difference that we can. You know all of the major events in the Bible other than the return of Jesus have already happened - they're already history. We've seen our origins, the great event of exodus, the story of exile, the messiah coming, the spirit on the day of Pentecost. This has all happened. The only big event left in the Bible for us is the return of Jesus Christ. So in the meantime we've got work to do to bring change and hope into our world.

Almighty Father thank you for sending your son Jesus and giving us through his resurrection a living hope that nothing can snatch away. In the uncertainties of life thank you that we have confidence in Jesus: hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. Lord, in the light of us being roped to you, may we live bold, generous lives that transform our world until Christ returns. In his name we pray it. Amen.