

Thought for Sunday 15th November

Every 3rd Sunday, in the evening, we're exploring what the Bible has to say about a different question submitted by someone local. This month our question is "What's the Christian attitude towards death?"

"The Tattooist of Auschwitz" is a novel based on real life events, written by Heather Morris. A story of hope, determination and love, it's become a bestseller, with over 3 million copies sold and plans to make a TV series. Hope, determination and love. We love stories like that, don't we? Great stories always seem to have a heroine or hero who faces overwhelming odds, and yet who never gives up. Hope. Somehow, they always win out in the end.

Martin Luther King Jr, the American Christian minister and activist who became the most visible spokesperson and leader in the US civil rights movement in the last century, told the world:

"We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope."

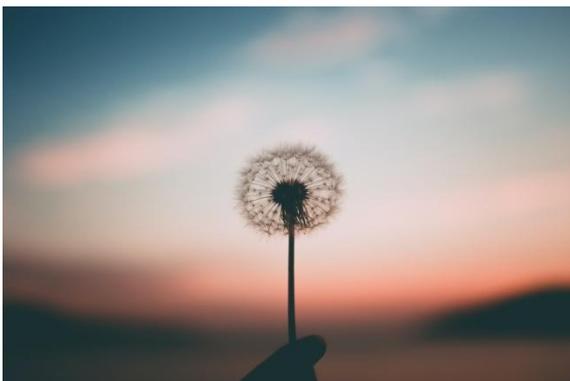
Now, I know that we use the word "hope" in many different ways. I *hope* Liverpool FC will win the Premier League again this season, and win the Champions League at the same time. I *hope* my car will be where I left it in the car park when I get back (where did I park it, by the way?). I *hope* the sun will rise tomorrow. One of these hopes is a vague, general wish; one is a pretty solid expectation. One is somewhere in the middle, depending on where the car park is.

In the Bible the word we translate "hope" is more like the word "expectation". The Hebrew word, used in the Old Testament, literally means "to trust, make a refuge, have confidence in". The Greek, used in the New Testament, means "expectation, anticipate with pleasure or joy". Look up where the word appears in the Bible and you'll see it's a pretty foundational word; "Christ in you, the *hope* of glory" (Colossians 1:27). "Those who *hope* in the Lord will renew their strength" (Isaiah 40:31); "Faith and love.. spring from the *hope* stored up for you in heaven" (Colossians 1:4,5).

Hope does not replace sorrow or grieving. Most of us, when we come up against sorrow, illness and bereavement, grieve. We mourn. We're angry. And that's ok – after all, death is a thing of this damaged world, not part of God's great plan for humanity (if you don't believe me, see for example 1 Corinthians 15:21-22). Jesus himself weeps and is angry at the monstrosity of death. It's a deep distortion of the creation he loves. We're not called to be happy about death and grief; we don't need to "keep a stiff upper lip" when all we want to do is rage against it.

But, the Bible says, we Christians do not grieve as those without hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13,14). Rather, we grieve as those *with* hope; with confidence, with expectation, with anticipation. "Hope in what?" I hear someone ask. The answer the Bible gives is, hope of eternity with Jesus (Romans 6:5-9). Jesus died for us, and punched a hole through death so we could pass through safely. We share in his resurrection – that's our hope, our expectation, our anticipation.

We tend to see grief and hope as mutually exclusive, but the Bible doesn't. We grieve, but we do not grieve without hope. Years ago, as a famous preacher called Dwight Moody was dying, he said "Pretty soon you're going to read in the papers that Dwight Moody is dead. Don't you believe it. I will be more alive than I am right now".



"Grieve with hope;" writes Tim Keller, "wake up and be at peace; laugh in the face of death, and sing for joy at what's coming. If Jesus Christ has you by the hand, you can sing".

Now that's a story of hope, determination and love we can really believe in.

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