



## CLIMATE JUSTICE & DISCIPLESHIP

# REFLECTION WEEK 5 - HOPE

BY THE REVD DR DAVE BOOKLESS

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Over the past few weeks, we've been on a journey of contemplation and discipleship in relation to climate justice. Our travels have taken us through stations, places to pause and reflect, consisting of humility, solidarity, example, accountability. Today we visit hope. Note, I did not say we arrive at hope, because hope is not our final destination. Each week we have been given further resources to help us on our journey. Hope is part of that journey towards a destination which, in the words of Hebrews 11, we still cannot fully see.

So, what do we mean by hope as followers of Christ, and how can we seek and find hope amidst a climate of despair?

Firstly, Christian hope is not the same as optimism. There is a growing movement in the wildlife conservation world called 'Conservation Optimism'. It seeks to tell the good news stories of where species are recovering, habitats being restored, policies implemented well. There's a place for this, in the immortal words of Monty Python, it's important to 'always look on the bright side of life'. It heartens and encourages conservation staff and volunteers who are easily overwhelmed by grief and despair. But if we take a wider look, we cannot cover up the fact that these are small islands of optimism amidst the rising seas of our climate and biodiversity crisis.

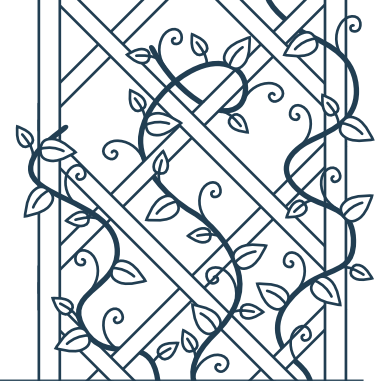
Secondly, Christian hope begins not with optimism but, counterintuitively, with grief and lament. It looks at the facts and absorbs their awful implications. The theologian Hannah Malcolm, in *Words for a Dying World*, her powerful anthology of stories of grief and courage from the global church, says this: "The Bible's apocalyptic literature has taught me that we cannot propose a hopeful future without first grieving our doomed present." Biblically, hope begins in lament: carrying our questions, our anger, our helplessness and grief to God. Two weeks ago, I was speaking at a conference and invited delegates to write their own Psalms of lament about the climate and nature crisis. When they were read out, there was a holy silence, as we absorbed and internalised the pain, and I wasn't the only one who was choked up. Tears are often the seeds from which hope grows. Our churches should be places where we rediscover and rewrite songs of lament. Let me read briefly from Jeremiah 9:

*"Oh, that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears!  
I would weep day and night for the slain of my people. ...  
I will weep and wail for the mountains  
and take up a lament concerning the wilderness grasslands.  
They are desolate and untravelled,  
and the lowing of cattle is not heard.  
The birds have all fled and the animals are gone."*



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Thirdly, biblical hope is not founded on our human actions, although those are urgent and vital, and we'll come to them. It is founded rather on the character, the promises and the actions of God whom we see most clearly in Jesus Christ. God's character is one of creative, sustaining love for the creation he declares 'very good'; God's character is of justice for the weak and vulnerable; God's character is of compassion for all that God has made – human and nonhuman. God's promises are of a covenant, made through Noah, with every living creature and with earth itself. God's promise in Christ is that all things in heaven and on earth will be reconciled to God, that one day creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay. God's actions are ever creating, ever sustaining, ever renewing. Supremely, God's actions are seen in Jesus Christ, who blessed creation by his incarnation, the Creator becoming a creature, who used nature for his stories and parables, who died not just to save lost humanity but to heal a wounded creation, whose resurrection body demonstrates God's transforming purposes for material creation, and who promises one day to make all things new again – in other words to recycle this bruised and polluted creation into the fullness of the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

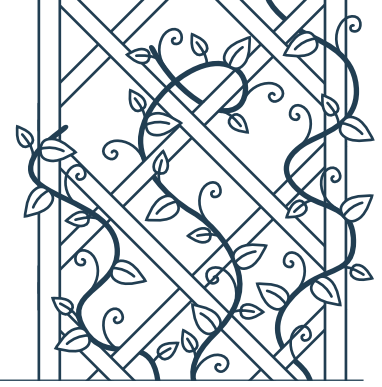
That brings us to our fourth point, to realise that there are two kinds of hope: proximate hope and ultimate hope. Proximate hope seeks its fulfilment in the here and now. It is the hope that governments will act, that COP30 in Brazil this November will see a global agreement on climate finance, that renewable energy investment will increase exponentially, that the Church of England will achieve Net Zero by 2030. These hopes are vital milestones towards climate justice, but they are always fragile. Proximate hopes can and often are shattered. I well remember the excitement in the climate movement leading up to COP15 in Copenhagen in 2009. There had been massive marches in London, encouraging noises from politicians, a concerted campaign ... and then devastating disappointment.

We need to lobby politicians, to put solar panels and heat pumps on our homes and churches, to change our diets, our travel habits and so on, but if we think thereby that we will save the planet, we will see our hopes disappointed again and again and again. I work for A Rocha International, the global hub of a movement of national Christian environmental charities in 20+ countries and we see the fragility of proximate hope on a regular basis. For over 40 years we've campaigned to protect the Alvor Estuary in Southern Portugal from unsustainable tourist development. We've patiently conducted scientific surveys, we've worked with local communities, we've lobbied politicians and achieved protection at local, regional, national and European levels. Yet the land is owned by unscrupulous developers and banks and continues to be at risk. Our hopes remain proximate. Similarly, in Ghana, we have worked to save the Atewa Forest from opencast bauxite mining, which would devastate a unique habitat which our studies have shown supports over 700 butterfly species and many other unique and rare creatures. A Rocha Ghana has even taken its own government to court, challenging the proposed mining on ecological, cultural and social grounds. As so often, if you destroy nature the victims are not only wildlife but poor people. If Atewa is destroyed, five million Ghanaians will lose their water supply. Today, A Rocha Ghana appears to be on the verge of success. A new government has been elected with the promise of turning Atewa into a national park. Yet, our hopes remain proximate, knowing that politics and human nature are deeply flawed.



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If our hopes were based only on human actions I would be tempted towards total despair. But our ultimate hope is based on God's character, promises and actions. One of my secret passions is Bollywood movies, and there's a line in a somewhat obscure film, *Salaam-e-Ishq*, which gave me the best theological definition of Christian hope I have come across. In the film, a middle-aged unmarried Delhi taxi driver is teased relentlessly for his absurd belief that one day he will collect a beautiful woman from the international arrivals at Delhi airport and they will fall in love and marry. When people tell him he's living in fantasy land he responds with these words: "It's a fact of future truth." When I heard that line my theological antenna woke up. Our ultimate hope, as Christians, is a fact of future truth. However bad things get, however many disappointments we suffer, whatever the scientists project, we do not lose hope, because of who God is and what God has done. Creation's redemption and renewal are a fact of future hope, guaranteed by the death and resurrection of Christ, which we will celebrate anew in a few days' time.

So, if our ultimate hope rests not on our actions but on God in Christ, does that mean we sit back and wait for Jesus to sort it all out? Not at all. We are called to live in the light of our future hope. In theological jargon, hopeful action is proleptic anticipation of God's final ending. In other words, because creation's redemption and renewal are a fact of future truth, that should inspire us to act now as if it's already true. As Martin Luther is alleged to have said (although the attribution is probably mythical), "If Jesus Christ were to return tomorrow, I would still plant my apple tree today." To change the analogy, in Jesus' parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids we are to keep our lamps lit as we anticipate the bridegroom's return – and an essential part of keeping our lamps lit is to care for the creation of which Jesus is Lord and which he will restore.

Theologically, the end of the world is not a full stop but a dynamic destination, not the closing of a book but the opening of a new chapter. 'End' means destiny, the fulfilment of God's purpose, the drawing together of all the threads. It is about shalom, restored peaceable relationships in every dimension: with God, within ourselves, with our neighbours near and far, and with the whole created universe and every creature within it.

As we've seen, hope is not mere optimism but begins with grief and lament at the reality of our situation and our inability to save ourselves. Rather it is ultimately found in the character, promises and actions of God in Christ. Yet, understanding our hope as found outside ourselves, beyond human solutions, should not lead to passivity or complacency but to a joyful desire to plant seeds of hope today in our own lives, our churches, our communities, throughout this world which is our home. My final thought is this. Hope is not a concept or belief that we cling to. Rather, hope is found as we act in the light of God's future. Hope is a muscle that only grows as we use it. Hope rises up as we take action with others, and with God's Spirit, to seek God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

The Rev Dr Dave Bookless, *8th April 2025*