

REFLECTION 11 FEBRUARY 2024

'When you walk through the storm'

By Rev Ross Scott

Without hope the people will perish. Or so we are told.

Hope is a strong driver. It was with hope the first settlers came from the Pacific to Aotearoa.

It was with hope the next waves of settlers came to New Zealand from Europe.

And it is with hope immigrants are still coming to Aotearoa New Zealand.

It was with Hope this Congregation was birthed on the foreshore of Pito-one and a building was built and rebuilt as a place of worship .

And it was with hope that we refurbished this building on a firm foundation a few years ago.

I want to explore Hope as I have encountered it with in my interactions with the health system and what I have observed as a chaplain.

After writing this sermon I attended a webinar on Difficult conversations around appropriate treatment options while in hospital. It was aimed at Dr's. As a chaplain it was valuable to understand the commitment and dedication for finding the appropriate and best treatment options for patients based on best medical Knowledge.

This quote was given by one of the presenters.

Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out. Vaclav Havel

That sums up what I am about to talk about.

My journey around Hope started with a slipped disk in my back. I was 26. I did physiotherapy (half heartedly). I tried an Osteopath. He also wanted me to do exercises.

I was young and I wanted someone to fix me. Something I have watched in the health system. I suspect we all have this belief, confidence that the medical system will fix us. Like a Childs trust in a parent, or like what we see on TV. They fix more often than have people die.

So, I talked my GP into sending me to a surgeon. An orthopaedic surgeon . A good man who was young and just getting into private practice. ACC to pay. A private hospital.

Two years latter the pain was back with numbness in my leg. I was at the theological hall and sitting in lectures was becoming a challenge. So, in my second year I lined myself up for surgery again.

This operation did not go well. I had post operative bleeding. 24 hours after the operation I was in extreme pain and then slowly lost feeling and strength in my legs. I was whipped back into surgery .

A week latter on my 29th birthday 9/11/87 when the surgeon was doing his rounds I ask: Would it come right? Would I walk again?

I was married with a 14 month old daughter and another child on the way. In the 80's the social expectation was still that a man was the key provider for a family. (According to recent resource that has not changed much.) In online dating services women want men with high incomes, the same does not apply to mens profiles. But I digress.

I looked from my bed for his answer to my question. Would I walk again?.

He said "I hope so"

His use of the word Hope was not what I was looking for. As I sunk back into my hospital bed for the first time I began to understand the meaning of hope.

It is not certainty. The surgeon was saying it was a possibility that I would come right **and** it was a possibility that I would not.

I began the journey to understanding hope.

Parents often use the word hope when they know it will happen. Teaching children that hope is a surety. I'm guilty of that.

In the Christian Funeral service there is the line. "In the Sure and Certain Hope of the resurrection"

Other traditions talk about being assured of our salvation.

Over the next hours and months I began to see that the use of sure and certain had coloured my understanding of hope. As a young man my life was before me. That life was "full of Hope" it was mine for the taking. That 'full of hope' did not have the possibility of not being fulfilled.

I had entered both operations in the Sure and Certain hope of recovery. I was going to have my back fixed.

Sure and Certain stood as great towers beside Hope.

In my person 9 11, my 29th birthday, the 9th of November, the twin towers of Sure and Certain came down.

I had walked into the hospital, If I had been late, I could have run into the hospital. I left the hospital two weeks later with a brace on my left leg and a walking stick to compensate for the weakness in my right leg. Rather than looking after a vacant parish over the summer I spent it at home going for a daily walk around the block and the rest of the time feeling sorry for myself.

It took time for the rubble of "sure and certain" to be carted away.

Hope seemed to have been tamed, It was now an expression of 'desire' that carried with it a strong dose of reality . That things could go either way. It seemed to have been weakened.

While I recovered a lot of what I lost over the following year I have not enjoyed the joy of running in a field. I am a bit unstable on my feet. I do not like uneven ground. I am sensitive to bad beds and chairs. I have a cocktail of painkillers to use when my back plays up.

Unlike when I was young and wanted someone else to fix me, I take responsibility for my own back care. I take responsibility for my health in general.

Working in a hospital I have come to see that much of what Dr's treat is related to lifestyle. Diet. Lack of exercise. Lack of sleep, Stress . Disconnection from nature. Disconnection from our home village, our wider family, those we grew up with. We are asking of our bodies things we did not evolve to do. Like sitting in front of a computer screen. Eating highly processed food. Staying up under artificial light.

These are based in the unrealistic expectations, hope, that the medical system will fix us up.

It is far from certain that it can, for this hope is based on Sure and Certain. And like with me, it will always fail to give the desired results in the end.

At the end 'all the Kings **nurses** and all the Queens **Dr's** 'cannot put us back together again.

For me in taking more responsibility for my own well-being I am beginning to discover that in the rubble of Sure and Certain there are other towers.

One is Faith.

So, let's take a sideways step. Faith is a little word with a massive amount of meaning and interpretations given to it.

I often hear people say they can only get through the crisis of life with their faith.

Others put it another way . Some cannot understand how people can live without faith. We had a volunteer working with us that often said that she cannot understand how people can live without faith when she come back from visiting patients. 'I don't know how they can get through life without faith'.

My response to her was to ask the patients how they get through. What is the faith that supports them. It was different from her's.

For me working with people's faith is the core of my job as a chaplain. Not mine, but their faith.

What do I mean by faith. Scholars may find my fluid definition a bit hard to cope with, but I find it is a word that has a high resistance to being locked down.

It is the beliefs we hold. It is our spirituality. It is our relationship to God, mother nature/the environment. It is the roots we have in family and church. It is embedded in the culture we grow up in. It is the values we live by, it is the expectations we hold. It is embedded in the way we relate to each other etc

Are you getting the picture? It is this wonderful potpourri of concepts that I call faith. We hold them in different measure and in different ratios.

Some of them come out of our nurture, some from education, some from the culture, the communities we belong to.

Some come out of our evolutionary past.

I see a major part of what I do as a chaplain is to help people connect with their Faith to make sense with what is happening. Actually, most people are quite good at doing that on their own, as a chaplain I am there to deal with the speed wobbles. Hold space till the shaking stops.

So back to my story. Walking out of hospital with a brace on my leg and a walking stick. A pregnant wife and a 14 month old I had the wobbles both physically and spiritually. My faith had been shaken. My faith in the course of my life, my expectations, my plans , my sense of responsibility, and the calling of God on my life.

These were the things that had come down with the towers Sure and Certain. Or had been weakened.

This is where I had to work at a personal level over the summer. These were what led me into depression and despair.

What I did find is that much of what I did believe was still intact . God had not abandoned me. Earlier life crisis had taught me that.

And this is what I found in the hospital. Most of the spiritual/faith resources are still intact. People just need a little help with some remedial work to give their faith more resilience.

One of the real joys is meeting people who have this resilience . I remember a woman who had just been told that she had run out of treatment options for her cancer. I expected her to be in a degree of crisis. She wasn't, instead she said that she was fortunate to be able to teach and help her children learn about the final stage of life. Death

Another woman when told her remaining kidney had failed and that death would be about 2-5 days away. She said to me. Hasn't it done well, I have lived on one kidney for over 60 years. I have two children and 6 grand children. Hasn't it done well!

So, in the rubble of the towers of Sure and Certain I discovered that tower of Faith.

Faith Hope and Love.

Would I have been able to stop the tower of faith from wobbling on my own.

I think not. It was my wife's support. It was my daughter who at 14 months just took me in her stride and continued to love me.

Over the summer I had a number of visitors, some of my classmates. And you know some were really good for me. And some !?!?!

The ones who were best for me were the ones willing to enter into my suffering. Who could hear my despair. Who could hold the space for me to talk **as I found my understanding of what had happened** and then help me face my future.

Love. The second tower left standing when Sure and Certain collapsed.

I see it time and time again in hospital . It is the families and friends that make a difference in the journey. It is the cleaners and health care assistants. Who bring kindness to their work. It is the compassion that nurses are able to bring, the commitment of the therapists The positive encouragement .

We often hear in the media of where the health system failed people. What we do not hear is the loyalty and commitment of staff to the patients and family.

Sadly under the stress the health system is under the emotional resources of staff can be a bit stretched. Which means that the love that comes from family and friends is even more important.

It is love in the form of compassion, kindness, consideration along with encouragement, commitment, dedication, loyalty, respect, responsibility.

It is love that gets people through. That is why the strongest tower is **love**.

Faith, Hope and Love and the strongest of these is Love.

So where does this leave Hope.

With sure and certain removed. Has it become weak and wishy washy?

No. In hope we now have the backing of faith, that great wealth of beliefs and values of connectedness with God.

In Hope we now have the backing of Love. The recurse of support form community and God.

So, with this backing we can look forward with hope. Not dependant on the desired outcome but with true hope. It is the possibility we want. For without hope of that possibility we may sink into despair.

And if the thing we hope for does not come to pass, then we still have the strength of our faith and the support of our loving community. And we can refocus our hope.

Hope for the next task in our lives, and if that next task is preparing for death, then we have faith and Love with us. And like the women I spoke of earlier we can use the time preparing our families to the reality of death. Time for dreaming of what is to come. Dreaming our eternal dreams.

As a chaplain we help people to be grounded in their faith (not ours). We bring Love along side all the other love. And in this environment of faith and love, Hope can flourish.

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It makes sense with the help of Faith and Love.

But towers need to be grounded. They need a firm foundation.

Foundations are not airy fairy. They are firm.

And what I see is that the foundation is based on being fully informed. Having the facts. Knowing the medical information. Being informed

The three towers work best with the facts. Not wishful thinking.

Good hope is built on the foundation of knowledge about what is happening. I needed that. And I needed to talk about it to get it into my head.

And so, I will at times help people to tell the story of what is going on, what they know of their condition. This sets the foundation of what can be hoped for. How their faith can be applied. And the best way that love can surround us.

Faith Hope and Love on a firm foundation.

Without hope the people perish. That hope needs to be well grounded. And well supported.

On the foundation of being fully informed, with the twin towers of Faith, and Love