

## Reflection: Reasons for Hope.

*Matthew 16:13-20.*

Simon Peter answered: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God".

We are called as the Church to follow in the footsteps of Peter. But do we have enough confidence and hope to make that proclamation and to claim Christ's authority to establish the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven? Often Hope seems the neglected sister of Faith and Love. Despite the "full assurance of hope" talked of in Hebrews [6:11] it does not come easily to us. Too readily we say: "It has always been like this and you cannot change the natural order of things". Yet the world has never been more in need of that very distinctive and revolutionary Christian virtue of Hope, challenging its old discredited order.

Archbishop Rowan Williams, when challenged that he did not understand how the real world works, responded:

"Why should I take for granted how the international financial system works? Why should I assume that this is a law of nature? Perhaps it is a good idea to ask: Do we want to be locked into this? And if we don't, what can we do about it? Just raising that question is a sign of hope".

It is too easy to lapse into helpless despair. The problems we face seem overwhelming. There are so many greedy and corrupt vested interests to overcome. How do we reverse global warming and its destruction of our environment? How do we turn the tide of hate-filled nationalistic populism and restore democratic decencies? How do we even *begin* to cope with the human and economic devastation of Covid 19?

I believe that we can gain confidence from history.

The great social reformers of the Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries could have looked at slavery, child labour, ignorance, poverty, disenfranchisement, and endemic sickness and said "We cannot reverse the natural order". But, often sustained by Christian Hope, they did not give up. They did not bow down to the vested interests of the Slave Trade or the Medical Establishment. Now in the UK universal adult franchise and free access to health and education have become our natural order, although sadly never to be taken for granted.

We risk being sucked under by doom and gloom, certain that society is going backwards rather than forwards; that despair is too much for us to overcome. For many people Hope is no more than a Disney princess mouthing platitudes.

But we must never lose sight of the fact that history gives us grounds for optimism. A few random examples:

In 1800 global age expectancy at birth was about 30. In 2019 it was approaching 73. I know that Covid has seemed a frightening reverse. The current estimate is that globally it has caused well over 600,000 deaths. But historically the graphs of life expectancy even after times of horrendous mortality (for instance in the UK by plague in 1558 and 1625) showed rapid and sustained improvement. I am sure that we shall see a similar pattern in the 2020s.

Similarly, in the last fifty years there has been dramatic world-wide improvement in so many areas of apparent hopelessness: in survival rates for infant cancer; in cereal yields at harvest; in the share of the earth's surface protected by national parks; in ozone depletion; in adult literacy; in the number of nuclear warheads; and so the list could go on.

I appreciate that statistics, even positive ones, can in themselves overwhelm us and that such historical, economic, political and sociological issues do not grab everybody's imagination.

Therefore let me end with a more mundane story of hope that may make your heart race as it does mine. Do you recognise that sound?

*[Play recording. Suggest a brief extract from RSBP video, You Tube 11 September 2019. 10 seconds of the boomy bits! Or even do a Percy Edwards!]*

The booming of a bittern, a bird for centuries native to the wetlands of Suffolk and Lancashire whose call was iconic of an English rural idyll. But as sea levels rose and those native wetlands disappeared the bittern seemed doomed to extinction in the UK. As recently as 1997 all seemed lost; only eight breeding males survived, concentrated in one Suffolk site. However, thanks to the apparently mundane work of the RSPB in conserving reed beds throughout England and Wales, the bittern has survived and diversified. There are now over 200 of them recorded on 90 different sites.

It may not be fashionable, but if there is hope for bitterns there must also be hope for us. Let the boom of the bittern be our clarion call of Hope as we, like Peter, proclaim: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living Lord" and establish Christ's Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

*[Reprise recording] Amen.*