REASONS TO HOPE
Mark 8: 27-38

Dear Members of the Congregation,
What are we hoping for? Have our hopes changed recently? And if so, what may have brought about such a change? What is the horizon of our hopes and dreams? Nobody can hope outside of a horizon, and yet our horizons constantly shift and change.

In an age of globalisation, of environmental awareness, confronted by the challenges and consequences of the ongoing fourth wave of industrialisation as well as by ever-increasing intercultural and interreligious encounter and suspicion, our hope is likely to differ from the hopes of previous generations. Of course, like them we too face death and decay; we too have to learn to accept that our lives are mortal. Death remains a permanent challenge to human life throughout the ages. And yet, how we human beings relate to death has changed dramatically even within a Christian horizon. While previous generations of Christians considered death as the entry point to the really real life with God in the community of saints, today many Christians find it difficult to articulate their hope for some sort of life after death. Post-mortal geography, including heaven, hell and purgatory, has lost much of its attraction and fascination. The eschatological landscape is shifting under our feet. But what are we actually hoping for? How might we approach hope afresh today? Should we start by reviewing the content of our faith that is the spectrum of biblical and ecclesial expressions of what we believe to be
the case when we die? Is our hope, then, merely a consequence of our beliefs? How are hope and faith related?

The Gospel story which we just heard sheds some light on hope and the painful purification of the hopes which have arisen from our beliefs. The apostle Peter is the hero of this prominently placed passage at the centre of Mark’s gospel. Peter’s beliefs are traditional: he genuinely believes and loudly confesses that Jesus is the Messiah who has come to restore Israel to its former political and religious glory. However, the hopes associated with such a belief are challenged by Jesus in the conversation that follows. Peter does not like the idea that the Messiah is to suffer, is to be rejected and killed. Hence, he rebukes Jesus for such disturbing talk. And now, not unlike in the middle of most ancient Greek tragedies, here too a catastrophe occurs: the orthodox Peter is called ‘Satan’ by his Messiah. ‘Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’ What Peter had been hoping to have found in Jesus both for the sake of Israel’s and his own future is exposed as standing in sharp contradiction to the will of God. The hopes invested in Jesus of Nazareth are declared to be of the devil. It would be euphemistic to speak here merely of a purification of Peter’s hopes. Rather, Peter’s hopes are brutally exposed and rejected. At the same time, Peter is confronted with a radically different horizon for hope, namely God’s horizon. Following Jesus on the way of God makes serious demands on any hope associated with such discipleship. What Jesus invites is a form of radical hope – radical because it accepts the call to a journey without knowing the end; radical – because it is not cushioned and protected by the certainty of a well-defined system of beliefs and doctrines.

Hence, it may be appropriate to distinguish between human hopes, religious hope, and radical hope. Like Peter we all have hopes: for a long, fulfilled and healthy life: for a reasonable income; to stay in Europe or to have a future outside it. We have hopes for ourselves and at times even for others, for the world around us, for peace and justice, and for the universe at large. Sometimes, we may become prisoners of our hopes when we no longer see beyond them and our own particular desires and longings. Then, we require liberation from our hopes. Religious hope can take the form of idols or icons. Thus, it may merely mirror our desires or it may open up a horizon of transcendence. In that sense, we could argue that our hopes need to be liberated by hope itself, a hope we may share with others and which points us beyond any fixation on our own selfish horizon and cheerful optimism.
Optimism is no bad thing in itself. Rather, it is a kind of implicit confidence that things are going well as they are. ‘Optimism may be simply a feature of temperament expressing itself in a spontaneous logic: we can manage and cope in a world that is reasonably predictable. Optimism is happy enough with the system. In contrast, genuine hope is always “against hope.” It begins where optimism reaches the end of its tether.’ (A Kelly)

Our gospel reading today has nothing to do with optimism. Rather, Jesus calls his disciples to orientate their hope on God. He does not ask his followers to carry his cross, instead he asks them to carry their own respective crosses. This means he invites people to proceed on a personal and communal pilgrimage with Jesus to God by choosing and sharing their own life when following its course into a future opened up by God. This is neither optimism nor an act of embracing a new and different set of clearly defined hopes; it is an invitation to embrace radical hope.

Radical hope involves ultimate trust in God’s ongoing relationship and accompaniment even when all prominent markers of cultural security and religious belief and tradition have collapsed. Radical hope, however, is not a blind hope. It is a hope nurtured by an intimate relationship with God. Thus, radical hope is not a principle (Bloch), but a relationship. Thus, it is not an object of desire or aspiration, but it calls for walking together into an as yet unknown future filled with the promise of an ever intensifying divine-human love relationship. Radical hope is an invitation to enter into a life of compact relational experience and mystical density. However, it comes at a cost. It is that cost which Peter seems unwilling to pay at this point of his friendship with Jesus and his emerging community. The cost of radical hope is to give up one’s idols and one’s hopes for the sake of this intense, unashamed, dynamic and at times painful orientation in love with God here and now.

Jesus does not promise some sort of future heaven here. All he offers is the consummation of this divine-human relationship in God’s glory. Hence, we may relax and stop feeling guilty for not having a clear enough comprehension of heaven and paradise in line with our respective denominational catechisms. Let’s face it: many images of heaven are simply boring. Yet, what Jesus invites to is not belief in some boring and static heaven or past paradise, but a radical and dynamic relational hope in God’s
transforming presence that is already here and now. What view of the future is that?

The collapse of much Christian eschatology in recent decades need not be a bad thing. Not so long ago, Christians nurtured a hope to remain among themselves in heaven. There were few, if any, images of the possibility of a shared future with others. Hence the joke that when a Protestant comes to heaven and hears loud voices in some corner he asks Peter what is going on behind these heavenly walls. Peter replies: ‘Lower your voice so as not to disturb the Catholics over there, because they think they are alone in heaven.’ And when, not long before his death, the Swiss theologian Karl Barth was asked whether or not he expected to see his loved ones again on the other side of death, he replied, ‘I am afraid not only my loved ones’. It would seem that we not only have a problem with otherness during our lives, but even with regard to our expectations of God’s future. We have often harboured rather tribal views of God and God’s church.

The point of radical hope is to free ourselves from such restrictive views and for a personal and communal relationship with God and God’s people beyond our own bourgeois calculations, ecclesial idols, and nationalist obsessions. Radical hope might be able to liberate our eschatology toward including otherness, even the radical otherness of God.

The recent wave of refugees from the war in Syria and elsewhere hitting European countries has reminded us of the fact that we share this earth with many others. Globalisation is here to stay. Nostalgic references to past concepts of imperial sovereignty cannot help us when searching for guidance on how to live in and share this world with our many and different neighbours. In this situation, do we behave like Peter and reject any call on us to reconsider our hopes in the face of change, even painful change? Do our hopes concentrate on justice for us or on justice for all? Do our hopes concern liberation from oppression only on our shores? Do we continue to cling to the idea of a past paradise or heaven when challenged to follow Jesus on the way to encounter the God of this universe and his suffering, persecuted and exploited creatures here and now? Jesus did not leave us in doubt that the conversion to loving God and God’s creative and reconciling project may be painful. Change is painful. Are we prepared to accept this pain, our cross so to speak, and follow Jesus on his way to a glorious future with God for all women, men and children, past, present and yet to be born?
It is interesting to note the surprising convergence of recent academic approaches to life around the concept of relationship. When considering the so-called fourth wave of industrialisation which follows the invention of the steam engine, the period of automatization, and the IT and AI revolutions, and which now urges us all to think more in terms of networks – networks between people and systems, networks between machines and robots, we may appreciate how this new wave of networking highlights the potential inter-responsiveness of movements and people beyond any hitherto known borders and boundaries.

The increasing awareness that women, men and children in this universe share responsibility for its environmental future has helped to establish new ways of global co-operation and of learning from each other’s views and experiences. The only future imaginable now for humanity is a shared future.

Also for many post- or late-modern philosophers, inter-relationship has become a key term when trying to make sense of human life today. There is never just an isolated text; rather all texts are inter-textual products from the beginning. The semantic web that envelops past, present and future genres, styles and expressions demonstrates the inter-relatedness of all human speech and expression. Thus, it won’t be realistic to create separate and immune semantic or legal spaces for human rights.

The radical and ever more intense encounter between different cultures and religions in our global village has led at once to an increasing awareness that we all are in this together in spite of our differences and to an epic battle for defending differences and their cultural and religious expressions. Underlying our approaches to difference and otherness are our hopes for our own future – before and after death.

Our hopes inspire and guide our actions. Hence, our hopes need to be cultivated, nurtured, challenged and transformed. The most promising biblical proposal for such transformation is the praxis of love. The love command in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the New Testament as well as the approach to understanding God-self in terms of eternal love have opened up a promising way of facing difference and otherness in our lives.

The encounter between Peter and Jesus in today’s gospel passage offers us a glimpse of what may be at stake in the liberation and transformation of
hopes into radical hope. For Peter, the Messiah was expected to fulfil Peter's hopes for Israel as well as for himself. What a disappointment it must have been for Peter to realise that Jesus rejected such an expectation and instead pointed to God’s mysterious project of creation and redemption in this world. ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?’ These words have at times been interpreted as a call for total sacrifice of life, an invitation to martyrdom. However, they could also be read to suggest that the meaning of life ultimately lies in this dynamic relationship with God in Jesus, in the ongoing purification of our hopes in the eternal glory of God’s love. In that sense, God’s offer of love remains the star of redemption.

The continuation of Peter’s story in Mark’s gospel, however, does not make for happy reading. When following Jesus brings Peter into acute danger in Jerusalem, he prefers to save his own life at the expense of his love for Jesus and God. ‘I do not know this man you are talking about’, he proclaims when accused of being associated with Jesus and his ministry and journey. Mark’s gospel leaves no doubt about the failure of Jesus’s disciples. As Peter demonstrates, it is no easy task to let one’s hopes be liberated and transformed by association with Jesus.

This biblical insight into the ambiguity of our human and religious hopes points to the need to critique all those utopian projects aiming to perfect human nature and society through exclusively human calculations, but also the need to critique those Christian projects which either identify particular ecclesial manifestations with ultimate features of God’s reign or contrast in a dualistic fashion a totally new world to come with our present world as completely fallen. How are we as Christians to navigate our lives between the vocation to contribute to the coming reign of God in the freedom of our created existence and the hope that God’s sovereignty will judge, heal and perfect this universe and our lives? Moreover, how are we Christians to cooperate with others who do not share our hope?

In Christian theology and proclamation we have got used to the predominance of faith over hope and love. Wars have been and are being fought over the truth of revealed religion. Orthodoxy, i.e. right belief, has
been the seen as the natural key to Christian conviction. However, listening to today’s gospel story, we may wish to reconsider such an approach. Peter’s beliefs and hopes have been challenged by Jesus in the name of moving with God in this world and to make our contribution to God’s unfolding reign. Hence, not orthodoxy but orthopraxis is called for. And this orthopraxis is inspired by the divine-human love relationship to which Jesus invites all in his life and ministry. Maybe it is time to re-order the theological virtues: Our faith and hope ought to be guided by our praxis of love.

In Jesus God has renewed his invitation to us to enter a dynamic and eternal network of relationships: to other human beings, to God, to God’s universe and to our own fragile and emerging selves. Hence, as Christians, we are eminently qualified to participate in the ongoing conversation on the gift of relationship, of networks and networking in our world today. We can contribute our hope – always prepared to be purified in love – not as a theory about life, not a set of utopian convictions, but as a lived praxis of love. Come and see how we love each other!

This praxis of love has nothing to do with sentimentalism and romantic desires. Rather, the demands of this praxis of love include continuing conversion to God’s transformative presence in all genuine love relationships. As the gospels emphasise, the love of God calls for works of justice, for works of liberating women, men and children from all forms of oppression, and for works to overcome fear. Christians are called to serve God and each other, whilst always being open to be surprised by God’s dynamics of love. Thus, the reign of God is not a utopia which one day will be revealed nor a blue print for administering salvation. Rather, the reign of God is a communal praxis of love to which God has invited each and everybody to participate. This reign is thus already under way though not yet complete. Do we wish to participate or do we, like the apostle Peter in today’s reading, prefer to hang on to our own dogmatic images of how God’s reign ought to manifest itself? Christian discipleship, then, is a life-long struggle to accept the God-given freedom and equality to love and to serve in God’s great and ongoing project of creation and reconciliation.

Sharing in God’s love, however, is neither a Christian invention nor possession. Rather with all women, men and children of goodwill we share the challenge to deal with difference, justice, and otherness in love – that means respecting the other’s otherness and needs and being willing to
explore his or her otherness as well as our own otherness and God’s radical otherness. Tolerance is weak and static; the praxis of love is strong, dynamic and transformative. Love alone can overcome artificial boundaries, nostalgic entrapments, nationalistic confusions, egoistic proclamations of sovereignty, and tribal forms of religion.

Today’s gospel passage invites and inspires us to embrace and develop a culture of hope in love. It destroys false images of heaven and it opens up visions of a new praxis of love that transforms this world into a place where God’s eternal love relationship with humanity and all of creation can flourish. Eschatology, then, must not be understood as a blueprint for the journey to heaven. Rather, love is always already an eschatological force because God is always already present in love. The praxis of love will transform the earth and guide us on the path of justice and peace.

However, today’s passage from Mark’s gospel also reminds us quite powerfully that love requires a continuous and at times painful process of conversion: our hopes need to be liberated by love and our faith needs to be dynamized by love. This is not easy, and it will require a new approach to Christian community in this world. God’s love desires community with both the dead and the living people of this universe. Hence, radical hope will take up the challenge to re-order the memory of previous generations in the horizon of the creative and reconciling love of God. The Christian church is called to become a community inspired by such love. However, it is also called to engage in inter-hope conversations with other religious and secular communities. God wants us to help in transforming this universe and not to construct any other world. Hence, only a critical and self-critical praxis of love will be able to reveal if we are open to God’s transforming presence inside and outside our own ecclesial communities.

The point of Christian life is not to possess and confess a coherent system of beliefs; rather it is to follow Jesus Christ on the path of love, justice, forgiveness, reconciliation and transformation. Our hope lies in God and the praxis of love, which he invites us to embark on here and now. In this sense, our future shared with others and with God, the radical other, is firmly under way. This is a radical hope indeed.