

Hinde Street Methodist Church  
Friday 1 April 2022  
12.00 noon Rev Ken Howcroft

**Reading: Colossians 1:3-6, 13-20**

<sup>3</sup> In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>4</sup>for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, <sup>5</sup>because of **the hope laid up for you in heaven**. You have heard of **this hope** before in the word of the truth, the gospel <sup>6</sup>that has come to you. Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God. ...

<sup>13</sup>He (*the Father*) has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, <sup>14</sup>in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

<sup>15</sup>He (*the Son*) is the image of the invisible God, the **firstborn of all creation**;  
<sup>16</sup>for in him *all things* in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – *all things* have been created through him and for him. <sup>17</sup>He himself is before *all things*, and in him *all things* hold together.

<sup>18</sup>He is the head of the body, the Church.

He is the beginning, the **firstborn from the dead**  
so that he might come to have first place in *all things*. <sup>19</sup>For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, <sup>20</sup>and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself *all things*, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

**Sermon**

May the words that I speak and the thoughts and the feelings that we all experience be always acceptable in your sight O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

My **Text** is taken from just a few verses after that reading, **Colossians 1:27**

*“... to make known ... the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory”.*

When I got the call to preach at this service I was both moved and daunted. Moved because I had assisted at David’s funeral all those years ago; I had preached at Elizabeth’s; and now it is John’s. Daunted because as others have hinted earlier in this service, the call came with its own standing orders. I was to preach a “proper” sermon. What, if anything, that says about my normal sermons, I am not sure. It seemed to mean that on this occasion the sermon was definitely not to be about John. In theory all that is do-able, and I shall try my best. But as a certain now unmentionable person once said in a meeting with a straight face and that

twinkle hidden in his eye, “In theory, of course, there is no difference between theory and practice...”, leaving us to fill in the dot, dot, dot that ended the sentence.

Furthermore, the sermon was to be about Christian Hope and not faith (gulp!); and it was to be no more than about ten minutes (double gulp!). You might hope that I can keep to the last of those stipulations in particular. That is a wish, whether or not it is accompanied by a realistic expectation it will be achieved. I certainly hope to be able to fulfil all that is required. That is an aspiration. Some of you might also be hoping that I can produce some sort of theological unicorn out of a magical hat in the process. That would be a fantasy. None of them would equate fully or simply to Christian Hope.

So, where to start? Rowan Williams once said one of those apparently simple things which buzz around for years at the back of your mind continually prompting further reflection. It was to the effect that in the Christian life, faith affects your understanding; hope affects your remembering; and love affects your wanting or desiring. It is on the second of those that we must concentrate today. He goes on to say that “Hope, when it comes to birth, is not just a confidence that there is a future for us, it's also a confidence that there's a continuity so that the future is related to the same truth and living reality as the past and the present”. That way, he adds, “... the confusions about memory – Who were we? Who was I? Who am I, and who are we? (*and, I would add, our sense of the future – What will happen to the world? What will happen to us? Who will we be?*) become bearable”. They become bearable because hope brings a confidence that past, present and future are held together in a single relationship. That relationship is to a reality which does not go away and abandon us, but knows and sees and holds who we are. That reality is in turn focussed in someone who is a witness of us here on earth, and a witness for us there in heaven; a witness who does not abandon us to be trapped by the past, does not abandon us here in the present and will not abandon us in the future in this life or whatever follows.

Which brings us to God and Christ, and to the letter to the Colossians. In it Paul, or someone writing in the name of Paul, introduces the idea of hope in the opening verses. I have been emboldened, as it were, to highlight the references to it in the version printed for this service. It begins with the future aspect of hope, the hope laid up and waiting for us in heaven, not because that is its only or primary aspect of hope, but to remind us that the hope which comes from our individual and corporate human memories of the past and from our experience here in the present will also encompass whatever future is coming to us. If we let that hope grow, it bears fruit all over the place.

The writer goes on to imply that the reality that is God is something or rather someone to whom we relate as creator and parent. That God is focussed for us in human form in the son, Jesus Christ, whom we experience as witness, redeemer, and Lord; and, I would dare to say, friend.

The writer then seems to pick up a hymn that the Colossians already knew and used. We can perhaps therefore claim them as the first Methodists, because we Methodists – and a certain unmentionable person was a prime example of this – have always sung our faith more than we have said creeds. We use hymns to express the faith and our experiences of

it, and also to explore them. So the letter to the Colossians does not just quote the hymn, it also comments on it and draws things out of it.

The hymn, as you will see, is in two verses with a bridge or pivot point between them. The first verse is about how Christ holds together the whole of the natural or first creation, from the beginning until now. There is a repeated emphasis on “all things”. Those things include not just natural forces but also personal, social and even political dynamics and forces (“thrones, dominions, rulers and powers”, as it says) which do not always have beneficial effects. You only have to look at the ravages of the Covid pandemic and the Ukraine crisis to see that. But hope here means that we do not have to be trapped by them or by the memories of them. It means that even though we encounter deep tragedies in life we are still able to experience blessings.<sup>1</sup>

The second verse is about how Christ holds together the whole of the new creation, starting with his own resurrection and going on to encompass the renewal of ‘all things’ (that phrase again). That resurrection and recreation of all things is not a cancelling out of the crucifixion but the other side of the same coin to it. The great mystery is that it is through the interaction of the two together that all things are reconciled. And ‘all things’ there includes us.

The bridge or pivot point is that it is the church as the embodiment of Christ in the here and now which holds together in hope both past and future, both memories and possibilities. In the words of that well-known liturgical acclamation and response. “Wow!”

Such a church is not primarily an institution but a dynamic movement. The hymn we have just sung by Wesley sees it through a biblical image as the people of God moving on pilgrimage through space and time, from the past to the present and on to whatever the future holds. In that journey we all come at some point to a river. In the Bible it is the Jordan, which came to be seen as a metaphor for death, but also for baptism and rebirth. Part of his host have crossed the flood, and part are crossing now. And, as a verse of the hymn we did not sing says, we are to the margins come. And we expect to die. In Christian hope.

I recently watched a bishop lay down his office and retire. His cope and mitre were taken off him. He laid his pastoral staff on the cathedral altar. He was left wearing a simple shift, with a pilgrim’s walking stick in his hand. He walked slowly down the central aisle, through the choir and the nave, through the great congregation, still a representative disciple moving on to the next stage of his pilgrimage, wherever that might take him. The west doors swung open before him and he stood framed for a second on the threshold. Then he stepped out into the sunshine. In Christian hope. With Christ; the Christ who welcomes and calls him and has called John; the Christ who now calls and welcomes me and you. Christ in you, the hope of glory. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> In her address earlier in the service about John’s “Methodist” life, Susan Howdle had said his final words to her had been “Yes, I have had deep tragedies in my life. But it has been a blest life, for which I thank God. And the funeral service must focus not on me, but upon the Christian hope offered through Jesus Christ.”

Ken Howcroft

The Revd. Kenneth G Howcroft

President of the Methodist Conference, 2014-15

Minister at Hinde St Methodist Church, 1983-1988