

Eastertide reflection – what is ‘hope’ right now?

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Relatives of seven Palestinians killed by an Israeli airstrike on Sabra in Gaza City last week
ALAmy/Imago, Omar Ashtawy

In the face of death, cruelty and suffering in Gaza, a Catholic priest, the son of Jewish parents who fled Nazi Germany and found refuge in South Africa, searches for a hope rooted in the memory of past breakthroughs

The Israeli army continued its bombardment of Khan Younis last Saturday. In the bombing, Alaa al-Najjar, who was at work, lost nine of her 10 children: Sidar, Luqman, Sadin, Riwal, Ruslan, Jubran, Hawa, Rakan and Yahya. Her only surviving son, Adam, and her husband Hamdi, were critically wounded. I share these words with you under their gaze.

There is no light at the end of the tunnel right now in Palestine/Israel. The lights have gone out one by one. Zephaniah’s words ring out, “Ah, soiled, defiled, oppressing city! It has listened to no voice; it has accepted no correction” (Zephaniah 3:1). Our governments are made up predominantly of heartless leaders, who seem to have no conscience. And we continue to descend into the darkness of an age in which there is no hope, no mercy, no empathy, no compassion. When I try to push away this sense of despair, I feel I am betraying those who are mourning their dead, the wounded, those trapped as hostages and prisoners, the displaced and homeless, the hungry and thirsty, those dying slowly because there are no medicines, those locked into a reality in which the horizon of hope has been shut off, replaced with a solid wall that explicitly proclaims that there is no exit.

What is hope in my life as a Christian? I am well aware of what hope is not. It must not be an opium; Marx clairvoyantly defrocked hope as part of religion understood as a drug that anaesthetises burning desire for change. Hope must not be a neurotic illusion; Freud prophetically revealed the immature or psychologically unhealthy nature of hope that turns its back on the world, replacing it with a projection of an imaginative desire. It must not be an absurdity; Kafka has forced us to look at a world in which the hope of finding meaning is often an escape from the inevitability of senselessness.

Mature hope cannot be a flight from the harshness of reality. As a Christian, I must face the tragedy of our present times and the hopelessness it generates. If I am to be in solidarity with those who are on the front lines, I cannot mouth nice pieties. I must not turn away from death and suffering, burying my head in the sand like an ostrich. I must allow myself to be exposed, raw and hurting.

For reasons I cannot understand, God allows evil to have its day. I rebel and revolt against this, even against God Almighty who allows it. This rebellion is an integral part of the life of faith. Abraham cried out against God, who revealed to him the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

“Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked!” (Genesis 18:25). Habakkuk railed against God, who seemed deaf to his cries, “O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?” (Habakkuk 1:2). Jesus too, on the Cross, cried out this sense of abandonment that echoes throughout history, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34). At the ninth hour, hope has evaporated. The cry against God is part of the word of God. A certain kind of hope must die in contemplating the reality of violence, war and death.

There are two kinds of hope. There is a hope that is future oriented. It hopes for certain things that seem to appear faintly on a horizon. It roots itself in a vision that provides an alternative to the reality in which we find ourselves. Equality. Justice. Peace. Security. Prosperity. All these hopes are legitimate, when the horizon is not completely blocked off by walls that make exit from the present impossible. Our present is a wasteland left over from waves of unceasing hatred, unrelenting vengeance and brutal violence. When I look around in Palestine/Israel today and cry out to God, all those things that I might indeed have hoped for, now seem like phantoms; appearing briefly and then evaporating, shattered on the hard, merciless rocks of reality. Revenge. Hatred. Victory. Violence. Ethnocentricity. These rocks constitute our reality.

However, there is another sort of hope that struggles for breath inside me. A hope that is past oriented – a hope rooted in the memory of past breakthroughs. My Jewish parents fled Nazi Germany at a time when there was no hope and an empire of death held absolute sway. Those relatives who did not flee were murdered. My parents found refuge in South Africa where a racist regime erected a system of apartheid that privileged Whites over Blacks. It ground on for decades. Black people were sentenced to life in the margins, to pauperisation, brutal repression and hopelessness. Anyone who resisted was forcibly silenced. During those long years of death, hoping for something different from what was reality, mostly constituted wishful thinking, an avoidance of reality. Opium. Illusion. Absurdity. The privileged had the luxury of hoping, while the poor mostly experienced abandonment.

And yet, Nazi Germany and apartheid South Africa are memories of the past. This is a consolation in times of present darkness and gives birth to an occasional glimmer of hope in Palestine/Israel today. Memory of the past is an integral part of my life of faith. As a Christian I am called constantly to remember the Cross on which hung a man crucified. He died an excruciating death, painful and slowly suffocating.

As I gaze on him, I am forced to contemplate my own complicity in the structures of evil that had him condemned to death. There is no easy escape from that place. I must stand before the Cross on Good Friday and at the tomb in which he was laid on Holy Saturday. However, Easter Sunday does come. It is then I can remember that the tomb in which he was placed is empty. The God I believe in does not allow death, darkness and evil to have the final word. Sometimes God takes a long time. An exasperated Habakkuk heard the words “If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay” (Habakkuk 2:3). I do not understand the words “it will not delay”. All I sense is that interminable delay.

I am raging against God. In our present, there is no open horizon. Before us is more death, threats of even more destruction, ethnic cleansing and suffering. There is nothing I can hope for – equality, justice or peace – that does not seem like a total illusion within a reality where revenge, killing and cruelty are omnipresent. And yet ... hope is a part of who I am as a Christian. I stand before an empty tomb that contained the corpse of a man who had been tortured and crucified. His mangled body had been wrapped and placed in the tomb. But now he is not there. The tomb is astonishingly empty. The faith born before that empty tomb that he is risen is a part of whom I am. If I did not believe that the tomb is empty, I would not be a Christian. It is out of this conviction that a different kind of hope emerges.

This hope does not look toward an illusory horizon. This hope looks back, remembering that God has been good. This hope is born of the conviction that God desires good for humanity. This hope

finds its roots in an experience of God's life-giving love. It is out of this hope that I can continue to speak and act. It is this hope that will not allow me to give up, not on God and not on humanity. It is this hope that means I cannot walk past the dead, the wounded, the displaced, the hungry, I cannot look away from Gaza City, Khan Younis and Rafah, Jenin, Tulkarm and Nablus, I cannot forget those still hostages from all over Israel, those dead and mourning there too.

It is this hope that does not ask the question: what will happen to me if I see what is happening? What will happen to me if I speak out? Rather, it is this hope that prompts the question: what will happen to the people of Palestine/Israel if I do not see, if I do not speak out?

Hope is rooted in the experience of a God who loves us, and of a community that this hope engenders. Hope motivates me to know what is happening in Palestine/Israel and not look away. It pushes me to put faces, names and narratives to those who have died and are dying as we speak and not ignore them. Hope drives me to seek out others who are desperately trying to bring all this to an end, determined to do something together. Hope is the life force that seeks to make me and you witnesses to a humanity that is being extinguished in a world that turns away from those falling by the side of the road. Hope resources resilience that pushes on despite everything. My prayer is that this hope resists the growing despair.

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