

Seasons

Theme based reflections and outreach actions in ministry groups
The Word - Inform - Pray – Reach out – Create - Celebrate



With hope, comes renewal

On hope

Facts, figures and thoughts from Peter Heazlewood

We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope

– Martin Luther King Jnr

Spring is the season of re-birth. It is about warmer air, longer light, new things and new hopes. It is about life and the future.

For those who know me, they'll know that one of the most amazing experiences of my life was watching an entire river dry up over a number of years. The river was the Wimmera River in NW Victoria during the time of our region's fairly recent ten-year drought.

It was amazing across a number of annual visits to the Wimmera, to see the entire river simply dry up and disappear! It was truly one of the experiences I'll never forget, and whilst I was amazed to see the natural phenomenon that was a disappearing river, I was possibly more fascinated by my personal reaction to it.

Over these years of drought, I would travel to the river hoping each year to see something that gave me encouragement. But year after year I came away with a real sense of hopelessness and despair. It was seriously quite depressing, and by the time the river had gone, leaving only pools of brackish water and mud and dead fish on what had once been the river-floor, I was convinced that it was gone forever – that it had no hope of recovery. My hope like the river, had dried up.

According to Saint Paul, hope is one of the ‘big three’.

In Paul’s first letter to the people of Corinth, he identifies three things critical elements of life, those being love, faith - and hope. Whilst hope doesn’t take home the big award (that goes to ‘love’ according to Paul), hope figures as a hugely significant thing that we require to sustain us.

So, where are we in the hope ‘stakes’?

One way of approaching hope is on a generational level. This pits hope in the context of where we appear in the continuum of time and our social history. What I mean by this is that the hopes and expectations of my parents (I’m sure), were different to the hopes and expectations of my generation. In turn, the hopes and expectations of my children will (I’m sure), be different than mine.....and all of these hopes and expectations will be impacted on things like global, national and local history, economic health, technology, access to education and services and nature of leadership. If you are looking for a discussion topic, have a think about the sorts of hopes and dreams your parents were likely to have had, that you had/have and what your children are likely to have. What if anything, do we learn from this?

Another way to approach hope is to consider it on a geographic/socio economic level. How do your hopes differ from those of tribes-people in New Guinea? How do the hopes you hold for your children differ from those of a parent in a refugee camp in Eastern Africa or a person living in poverty in so many countries around the world? How do these contrasts in circumstance and experience impact on our perception of our lives – and hope in our lives? Are our perceptions of hope in our lives any less valid simply because they’re different, or our lives and lifestyles radically different? At the end of the day, I suppose its all relative.

In suburban Melbourne - and I suspect across most of the western world, there sometimes seems to be little to offer us hope. Or, maybe there is, but we just don’t recognize it or look for it in the right places?

We turn on the TV or open the newspaper and we’re fed a consistent diet of stories and reports that do little to encourage hope. You don’t have to look too far to encounter stories of hopelessness and despair. People doing bad things to each other, people behaving badly, poor economic outlooks and hardships, a society that is so focused on ‘me, me, me’ that it has forgotten ‘we, we, we’. That’s the impression I get from commercial media anyway. It seems to me to thrive on hopelessness. Why is that?

The management of our economy seems more than ever to put pressure on individuals and families to maintain the lifestyles that we want to. Have a chat at some stage to our people from Community Care and they'll tell stories of families and individuals under huge pressure, experiencing loss in relationship, social connection, stability - and loss of hope.

And here we are, starting spring in Australia (our season of hope) with a Federal election. What better time to observe the messages of hope that will be sprouted by our pollies? – that is, provided we vote them in. Hope here seems to be conditional, and of course in the world of politics and government there is sometimes a disconnect between what is promised and what is delivered. In fairness though, whilst it is easy and often fashionable to criticize our government, compare our system and the players in our system with other governments around the world. Once again, I guess its all relative.

Okay, enough of my rambling. How about some interesting things I've picked up in my research?

One of the things I encountered in my search for material about hope, was a questionnaire/tool referred to as 'Snyder's Hope Scale'.

Snyder (an academic), defined hope as "a positive motivational state that is based on an interactively derived sense of successful (a) agency (goal-directed energy) and (b) pathways (planning to meet goals)" .

The Hope Scale by Snyder contains 12 questions - 4 measuring 'pathways thinking', 4 measuring 'agency thinking', and 4 that are simply fillers. The level of hope of participants is measured based on their responses to the following:

1. I can think of many ways to get out of a jam.
2. I energetically pursue my goals.
3. I feel tired most of the time.
4. There are lots of ways around any problem.
5. I am easily downed in an argument.
6. I can think of many ways to get the things in life that are important to me.
7. I worry about my health.
8. Even when others get discouraged, I know I can find a way to solve the problem.
9. My past experiences have prepared me well for my future.
10. I've been pretty successful in life.
11. I usually find myself worrying about something.
12. I meet the goals that I set for myself.

I haven't taken the test myself, but its interesting to note what Snyder and his fellow academics measure hope against. Are these the things you measure hope against?

Another interesting discovery in my search for material about 'hope' came in the form of a project being administered by the government in Queensland. The *Queensland Plan*

provided an opportunity for Queenslanders to voice their opinions about what they want their future to look like – what their hopes are if you like.

So, here are some ideas from the good people of Queensland:

- There needs to be a clear understanding that learning and education is part of everything we do. Great success has been achieved when education/learning is taken out of the classroom and into the community.
- When our children finish 20 years of education they have always been treated as one of a crowd and they have learnt very little of the skills they require to be adults. To solve the problem, more education out of schools, mentorships, traineeships, apprenticeships, starting from younger ages where children learn one-on-one from older, wiser people.
- Legislate 'good faith' indemnity for non-commercial recreational activity to overcome fear of third-party liability.
- The mining boom will end and the manufacturing industry is in trouble. We need to focus on intellectual industries, exporting our intelligence. We need to invest in the exponential and future technologies – 3D printing, robotics, AI, biotechnology, synthetic biology, renewable technology and education.
- I think most bush children are automatically active – but there is no incentive for city children to do this unless they join a club voluntarily. There should be physical education every day in schools, structured to teach skills, not just supervised running around in the playground.
- Support local small business who are major employers and also to continue with large government projects to keep us moving forward.
- We need truly inclusive built environments which are age and disability friendly. In this way, everyone can contribute to making Queensland great.
- Support farmers' markets so that people have a chance to see food that has been freshly picked, talk to farmers, get a feel for how food is actually produced.
- Look at men's sheds, women's arts and crafts groups with so much talent and wisdom. Life skills have been lost and not passed on to the younger generation.
- Harness the skills of the retired and retiring baby boomers. Establish mentoring programs in all local government areas for small business, students, managers, future business owners. Promote 'it is never too late to learn' culture across all sectors and age groups.

So, what do we take from this? *The Queensland Plan* gives an idea of the sorts of things people in that part of the world hope for. Think about or discuss some of these views. What are your views? What are your hopes? What role can we as a faith community play in bringing hope and renewal?

What I find interesting about our Queensland friends is that it seems a lot of their hopes are for qualities rather than things. It may simply be a reflection of their relative economic health, or it may be something deeper. Do I sense that (amongst this group of respondents anyway), there's a slant towards a future that is more people focused – more community (rather than individual) focused?

Another question.....If the *Queensland Plan* is a barometer of our national thinking, does it actually reflect values and attitudes that existed in society 40-50 years ago?

Is there a return to a previous generation's hope emerging?

Hope quotes

"Tomorrow hope we have learned something from yesterday"

– John Wayne

"Never deprive someone of hope - it might be all they have"

- H. Jackson Brown Jnr

"We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope"

– Martin Luther King Jnr

"Learn from yesterday, live for today, hope for tomorrow. The important thing is not to stop questioning"

– Albert Einstein

Symbols of hope

There are two common symbols of hope. Do you know what they are?

The more common one is the symbol of the dove. I am going to surmise that this symbol comes from the Old Testament's story of Noah and the Ark, where Noah releases a dove from the ark following the flood. My recollection (without consulting my Bible) is that the dove returns with an olive branch to indicate that it has found land ie it brings hope to the survivors of the flood. If memory serves me well, the doves when once again released by Noah, fail to return, indicating that they've found home on land - once again a strong message of hope.

The other symbol of hope is the anchor – representing the seaman’s last resort in crisis. The anchor becomes the symbol of hope when all else is failing. I remember hearing somewhere that we commonly understand anchors to be used to stop a vessel and hold it fast. Another use for an anchor however is to use it to secure a vessel and use that anchor to enable the vessel to be pulled through dangerous waters.

The season of spring is recognized as the season of re-birth. In Australia, the significance of the seasons is less pronounced than in many other parts of the world. We know however that winter in many places means the disappearance of plants and vegetation, the deep snows of recess and the bitter cold of darkness. For these places, and possibly in a less dramatic way in Australia, the onset of springtime is the ultimate vision of hope and re-birth. The world comes to life, there is warmth in the air and longer hours of light.

So, spring 2013 will be our season of hope (recognizing that with hope, comes renewal) and surely for Christians, the greatest symbol of hope comes at the end of the season – as we prepare for the birth of Christ. Though Christmas in Australia occurs in summer, spring represents a time of preparation and of reflection as we approach Christmas - on so many levels the most amazing experience of hope! In the season of re-birth and new-life, anticipating Christ being born as a baby amongst us, represents for the world a light in the darkness, a way in the lostness, and hope where there is none.

So, to put our Seasons process into some sort of context, it might be useful to ask a few questions:

- Where do we see a need to bring hope and renewal?
- What is our motivation to bring hope and renewal?
- How can we play a part in the bringing of hope and renewal?

Finally.....

No doubt you’re wondering whatever happened to my river - the Wimmera? I’m pleased to say that the drought broke and in a relatively short period of time, the river returned. Of course I always knew it would (!) Ironically, it flooded!

The Word

This part of the Seasons process provides an opportunity to think about clues to hope that exist in the Christian Faith.

Season of Hope – Luke 7

It is no bad thing that our Season of Hope follows directly on from our Season of Healing. The two are intertwined in our lives as much as our faith. I don’t know whether hope is something that can exist unattached.

When we are sick we hope for healing. When we are alone, we hope for community. When we are enslaved we hope for freedom. In some ways, Hope is not far from desire, but it’s

very possible to desire something without having hope for it. I would very much like to have a restored 1967 Ford Mustang. I don't hope to get one, because I'd look silly driving it. Also, if I got everything I desired I'd be both unhappy and unhealthy.

We reserve hope for important things. We hope to be changed and in turn to change. Maybe the very act of hoping changes us.

Read Luke 7:1-10

Hope and Power

After Jesus had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. A centurion there had a slave whom he valued highly, and who was ill and close to death. When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to him, asking him to come and heal his slave. When they came to Jesus, they appealed to him earnestly, saying, 'He is worthy of having you do this for him, for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us.' And Jesus went with them, but when he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to say to him, 'Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed. For I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, "Go", and he goes, and to another, "Come", and he comes, and to my slave, "Do this", and the slave does it.' When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, he said, 'I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.' When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health.

The Centurion sends some people to Jesus to ask for healing for his slave.

He sends Jewish elders who vouch for his friendship with the Jewish people. He shows great respect; As Jesus nears his house, the Centurion makes it clear that he doesn't want Jesus to break Jewish purity laws by coming into a Roman house. "As Rome's representative, I have power over the world of soldiers and slaves. As God's representative, you have power over life and death." It is no wonder Jesus is amazed at the man's faith.

- How would the Centurion have felt, sending messages to Jesus and hoping for the best?
- What drove the Centurion to go to such lengths for his slave?
- Think of a time in your life when Hope was important to you.
- How much of what we hope for is under our control?
- Is part of living in hope a letting go of certainty?
- The Centurion tells Jesus who he believes Jesus is: "You have this power." Is part of our hope in reminding God of who we believe God is?

Tell Him What You See

Read Luke 7:18-27

Messengers from John the Baptist

The disciples of John reported all these things to him. So John summoned two of his disciples and sent them to the Lord to ask, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' When the men had come to him, they said, 'John the Baptist has sent us to you to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" ' Jesus had just then cured many people of diseases, plagues, and evil spirits, and had given sight to many who were blind. And he answered them, 'Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.'

When John's messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: 'What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who put on fine clothing and live in luxury are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you."

The Centurion sends messengers to Jesus out of respect. John sends messengers because he's in prison. John has been preaching of the days to come, when God will send another to change the whole world. Also, acting as God's prophet John has spoken out against Herod marrying a woman who is his brother's ex-wife as well as his niece. It's never healthy to attack a King, and so John is well aware that his days are numbered.

- What do you think John might be thinking about his own life and prophetic career as he sits in prison?
- What do you think John's hope might be?
- Jesus tells John's messengers "Tell him what you see..." Is hope something that we base on our experiences of God and each other?
- What do we see in the world around us that leads us to have hope?

Hope Brings Renewal

Read Luke 7:36-50

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw

it, he said to himself, 'If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner.'

Jesus spoke up and said to him, 'Simon, I have something to say to you.' 'Teacher,' he replied, 'speak.' 'A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?' Simon answered, 'I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the greater debt.' And Jesus said to him, 'You have judged rightly.' Then turning towards the woman, he said to Simon, 'Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.'

Then he said to her, 'Your sins are forgiven.' But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, 'Who is this who even forgives sins?' And he said to the woman, 'Your faith has saved you; go in peace.'

The woman behaves in a manner guaranteed to shock. In polite society, a woman was not expected to be present while men ate, and to touch someone's feet was an extraordinarily intimate act. People look at Jesus thinking "Doesn't he know what kind of woman she is?" Jesus points out that the Kingdom of Heaven is a kingdom of hospitality, and by anointing his feet, the woman has acted completely hospitably.

Before her sins are forgiven, before she has been granted entry into the Kingdom of Heaven, the woman is living as one of its citizens. It is her hopeful living that is encouraged by Jesus.

- Are there ways of living which seem strange to the people around us?
- Is there somebody in your life who lived as though the world was just (even when it was unjust) or good (even when it was bad). Did they give you hope?
- What would it mean to live hopefully?

Prayer

As a Christian faith community, we recognize the importance of spending time as individuals or as a group in prayer – meditating on the grace and power of God to move in the lives of those for whom we pray.

An exciting outcome of the Winter 'season of healing', was the establishment of a weekly prayer group at Coatesville – a chance for those who wished to participate to meet and to

pray for healing. Participants were invited to stay for whatever period of time worked for them.

Prayer can take whatever shape or form you wish it to and it is important to understand that whilst you and/or your group are praying, so are others in our community. It may be that some members of your group don't subscribe to the conventional notion of prayer. Where that's the case, it may be useful to encourage them to spend time thinking about hope and its power of renewal and what it means to them and those they care for.

Some may find it difficult to pray or lead prayer publically and that's okay. You may wish to use these words as a guide, or to break the ice.....

Loving God

We bring before you our prayers for hope.

We pray for those who've lost hope. Be with those who do it hard and for whom the future appears to be without hope.

We pray for hope bringers – those who through their actions and words restore hope and bring renewal where there is none.

We pray for ourselves in times when we lose hope. Provide for us a vision of your love. Give us a vision of future – a future of possibility and hope.

We pray for a community vision of the future that sings hope. May the decisions and actions of our leaders, our people and our community celebrate hope.

Loving Lord, in your name we pray

Amen

Prayer points

The following 'prayer points' are not exhaustive, but may assist in guiding your praying:

We pray for:

- *Those people who we know and those we don't who have lost hope.*
- *Those hope bringers, who's words and actions instill a sense of hope*
- *Supporters, friends and professionals who encourage hope in the lives of others*
- *Decision makers and leaders in our nation and our community with the capacity to inspire hope and make decisions that encourage direction, renewal and hope in the future.*

The miracle of silent prayer.

Consider silent prayer and meditation. As a group or individual, don't be afraid to allow groups periods of silence during which those who are present can allow themselves to focus on whatever they feel is important.

Outreach

We are hopeful that you and your group will decide on some sort of outreach activity (or activities) to complement the theme of 'With hope, comes renewal'. The choice of outreach activity and the extent to which your group engages this, is wholly the decision of you and/or your group. It may be as big or as small as you decide.

It is hoped that your group will embrace the outreach part of this process as it presents possibilities for very real positive change for others and as such, represents a critical part of ministry in the name of Christ.

Possible activities

If you're stuck for ideas, here's a brief list of things that you might consider doing as a group or individual. This list is far from exhaustive, but may trigger some ideas.....

- Visit someone you know needs some companionship or words of hope
- Send a card, email or text to someone who you think might need it, letting them know that you're thinking of them and are there for them
- Approach Coatesville Community Care to see if you can do anything to assist in their work of bringing hope
- Agree on an organisation that you recognizes brings hope to those who need it and consider ways (including fund-raising) you might support that organisation
- Spend a day, a week, a lifetime adopting a 'pay it forward' approach. Where someone does a favour for you, rather than pay them back, think about ways you can 'pay it forward' to someone else.

Recognize that in outreach, we are dealing with other people – some we know, some we don't. Ensure that actions we do for other people either directly or indirectly, are done with their permission. If dealing with a person or an organization, obtain permission first. Always respect other people's privacy and right to confidentiality.

Create

You are invited to contribute to the season's topic creatively. This could mean music, artwork, craftwork, poetry, drama etc. How do you respond to the concept of hope and renewal creatively? Its exciting here to consider the possibilities for creative response, and once again, groups or individuals are invited to engage in this part of the process in whatever way they feel comfortable.

Celebrate

At the conclusion of the Spring 'season of hope and renewal', it would be great for your group to celebrate the journey and any outcomes that have been experienced. Celebration can take whatever form your group wishes it to. It may extend simply to a quiet prayer of thanks, through to a presentation or celebration in worship.

Celebration of the journey taken also presents an opportunity to plan for the journey ahead. What did we learn during the season gone that will assist us into the next?

Once again, towards the end of the 'Spring season', the Leadership Group will be in touch to see how you might wish to celebrate.

Finally.....

We encourage your group to embrace the possibilities of *Seasons*. If you require further information or assistance, please get in touch with one of the Leaders.

Finally, we give thanks to God for the talents and energies of our people, and we give thanks to a generous God of hope and ongoing renewal.

Coatesville Leadership Group