

The first of two reflections by the much-travelled Fr Timothy Radcliffe, former Master General of the Dominican Order. It was given last May to young men and women discerning whether they had a vocation to religious life but contains wisdom for every follower of Jesus Christ.

'Hope means that I live now'

In this doom-laden time of war, hardship, loss and grief, there are two things at the heart of Christianity that are needed more than ever: hope and forgiveness / By TIMOTHY RADCLIFFE

JOHAN HENRY NEWMAN said: "Fear not that thy life shall come to an end, but rather fear that it shall never have a beginning." Or as someone very different, the novelist Jeanette Winterson, said: "As I try and understand how life works – and why some people cope better than others with adversity – I come back to something to do with saying yes to life, which is love of life, however inadequate, and love for the self, however found. Not in the me-first way that is the opposite of life and love, but with a salmon-like determination to swim upstream, however choppy upstream is, because this is your stream."

We are called to be fully alive. And to be alive fully, humanly, is to be able to let go of the burden of the past, and open ourselves to the hope of the future. To live now, we need forgiveness and hope.

Let us begin with hope. Doom is in the air. This is a tough time to be young. The future seems to be disappearing. Democracies all over the world are crumbling. Ecological catastrophe is looming. There is even, for the first time since I was a child, the threat of nuclear war. No wonder lots of people are deciding not to have children. So how can we hope?

Let me return to the Last Supper, the foundation of all our hope. I first began to glimpse this when I went to Rwanda at the beginning of the genocide, and found that I was lost for words. All that I could do was to share the Last Supper. More recently, I visited Syria. The Dominicans have a base in a monastery in the hills between Damascus and Homs. We were just three miles from the front line in the civil war and I was kept awake at night by the sound of artillery fire from a gun emplacement just 50 yards from my bedroom. Every morning, the monastery bell rang out defiantly, summoning us to the Eucharist. I wondered what the rebel soldiers in their nearby trenches thought of its sound echoing across the small valley that separated us. There is nothing like being close to people who would take pleasure in cutting off your head for disclosing the hope of the Last Supper.

At every Mass, we are transported back to the last night before Jesus' death, when everything is descending into chaos. Judas had betrayed Jesus, Peter was about to deny him, and the others are getting ready to flee. It seems that all that lies ahead is failure, suffering and death; the future has been swallowed up. Then Jesus takes the bread and breaks it, saying: "This is my body given for you." Every Sunday, we gather to remember the worst of all crises, the Last Supper, when Christ gave us the sacrament of hope. The



Timothy Radcliffe, third from left, with other delegates on a trip to Syria that took them close to the front line of the civil war

Eucharist is not a cheerful gathering of nice people who sing songs and feel good. It is an outrageous expression of hope in defiance of everything that could destroy it.

Jesus makes this audacious act of generosity in the face of death. If you are called to religious life, then you will be making your insane act of generosity in the face of death. Your own death, which probably seems a long way away. But also the death that may afflict your congregation and its most beloved projects. Gervase Mathew was a wonderful Dominican priest who taught in Oxford and was a friend of Tolkien and C.S. Lewis. When he was dying, he summoned me to his bedside and sent me out to buy a couple of bottles of beer. I went and got them, weeping. Gervase lifted his bottle and said: "To the Kingdom of God." A passing nurse said: "Father Gervase, you know that you are not supposed to drink with your pills?" He replied: "Don't be a silly old thing. I am going to die tomorrow morning."

YOU ARE probably facing the death of all sorts of institutions that were set up by your congregations, such as schools and hospitals. When I was elected Provincial of the Order of Preachers in England in 1988, my first duty was to visit a Dominican monastery of contemplative nuns, called Carisbrooke, on the Isle of Wight. I went with the previous Provincial. The sisters had reached the end of the road and had to face closure. One of them said to me: "But our dear Lord would not let Carisbrooke die, would he?" To which the Provincial replied: "He let his own Son die." So, like Jesus at the Last Supper, we can

face death with joy and hope. We can look death in the eye.

So what does a hope-filled life look like? Part of it is hanging in there, even when it seems pointless. I am in frequent contact with the Dominican brothers and sisters in Ukraine. Half of them are Polish and half Ukrainian. They could easily have fled to Poland. And it was necessary that so many people could. But to stay and just be there is a beautiful sign of hope. The Risen Lord said to his disciples: "Behold I am with you always, until the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

So how can you be signs of the Lord who remains until the end of time? Sometimes the most important thing we can do is just to remain with people in their hour of need. The Son of Man said: "I was sick and you visited me" (Matthew 25:36). Rowan Williams has said: "I'm not going away' is one of the most important things we can ever hear."

Another expression of this hope is just getting up each morning and doing whatever good deed the Lord gives you to do that day. St Paul says that we are "created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10). Terry Eagleton writes: "The most flourishing acts are those performed as though they were one's last, and thus accomplished not for their consequences but for their own sake."

Again it was in the war-torn Middle East that I saw this most beautifully. One of our Dominican brothers had been reluctant to return to Baghdad. He had been afraid but now he was happy to be there. He said to me: "Hope means that I live now, whatever may happen tomorrow." The only question is: What is given to me to do today? The Sisters of Charity care for disabled children who have

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The Tablet poem

Lazarus reflects

By Paul Jarman

And so, my time is imminent. Old
age
has caught up with me, just as it
must
with all men. My life wanes and, this
time,
there will be no revival; no gradual
awakening, with a voice calling my
name
from that faint light beyond the
miasma.
But it is not for the nearness of death
(this second death) that I grieve –
My body is weary of its daily
endeavours –
but for the uses to which I have
failed
to put this second gift of life.

Emerging from that confused
detritus
which became my mind in those
nascent days
beyond the tomb, my eyes were
opened
to the life that I had led before. It
was,
I dare to suggest, no worse a life
than most men of my acquaintance.
I frittered away time in idle converse
or the throwing of the dice; took too
much wine
sometimes (and quarrelled too
readily
thereafter); found reasons not to
visit
the synagogue and ways of
circumventing
precepts and duties; gently laughed
at Mary
for her piety and took for granted
Martha's unfailing solicitude. I
did not blaspheme or steal, rape or
murder. Within
my circle of friends, which included
Jews
and gentiles – “live and let live”
I always said – I was considered
generous
and now and then I dropped a coin
(or two)
into the laps of the blind and lame,
for my heart was never devoid of
pity.
No, a bad man you would not have
called me.

But in the new dawn I could see
that this passive rectitude was not
enough,
that henceforth things had to be
different.
Henceforth I would reverence God's
creation. Henceforth I would observe

the turning seasons, no longer
heedless
of the constellations or the colour-
changing
foliage, of the songs of birds or the
river's purl.
(Such things would I venerate with
the eyes
and ears of our parents in Eden.)
Henceforth
would I cry out against injustice and
stand
tall beside the downtrodden and the
outcast.
Henceforth would I study the words
of the prophets and those of other
great men
and even dare to add to these
some of my own observations,
gleaned
from no ordinary life, in the hope
that future generations of mankind
might read and benefit in some
small way.

All this was many years ago – too
distant now
to recollect how long these resolutions
possessed my mind or how rapidly
old habits whittled away
at a gratitude I deemed
indestructible.
Where are they now, those great
tomes that I would fill
with words of wisdom? Those poems
that would
move the hearts of generations to
come? Those men
and women (be they present or
future)
who could proudly testify
that a single sentence or deed of
mine
had transformed their lives? Once
more I hear
my Lord calling, calling, and when
we meet
I must yield up the talent that I
buried
in my idleness and hide my face in
shame.

Condemn me, you who can swear
by that which you believe in most,
that *your* second stab at life would
be otherwise.

Paul Jarman is a tutor for the Workers' Educational Association. On 2 February 2021 Pope Francis changed the liturgical feast of St Martha in the Church's universal calendar to include her sister and brother, Mary and Lazarus. Their combined feast day is 29 July.

fully fruitful. She worked with victims of war from all over the world, enabling them to have prosthetic limbs, finding them jobs. She worked with prisoners, training them to train dogs to help the disabled. Grace triumphed over the ugliness of sin, and her life became beautiful. She died of cancer two years ago.

Sometimes the spring of forgiveness takes a long time to arrive. One cannot force it. We see this especially with forgiveness for sexual abuse. We pray every day, “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us”, but we cannot demand of other people that they forgive. That would be another form of abuse. When people are lost in what Stephen Cherry calls “the wilderness of hurt”, they must be given time for forgiveness to emerge. The wounds of decades, even centuries, cannot be healed at our command, any more than can our wounded bodies. My surgeon tells me it will take 18 months for the wounds of my last operation to remove a cancerous tumour to fully heal. Think of the time that will be needed before the Ukrainian people will be able even to begin to contemplate the forgiveness of those who are even now bringing about their appalling suffering. Forgiveness is inseparable from patience.

So becoming forgiving people is not about being forgetful. It is opening the door for God's creative grace. It is inseparable from learning to talk to the other person who has hurt you. Unfreezing the sea; opening the way for healing words; letting the barren desert of hurt be touched by spring.

WE SHOULD remember that neither the person who is hurt nor the one who hurts is defined by the act. They should not be trapped by the labels of “victim” and “perpetrator” forever. There is a fraternity of Lay Dominicans in the US whose members are mostly people in prison for murder. They may have committed murder but they are not forever imprisoned by the definition, “murderer”. I loved meeting an old Mafia hitman who had killed many people but who now recites his breviary. He told me he felt like a Dominican enclosed nun. I am proud he is my brother.

We share our faith explicitly by word or implicitly by how we live. We believe that our faith is true, and human beings can only thrive in the clear air of the truth. The Lord of the truth summons us to live now. And we do this by letting go of the burden of the past and opening ourselves to promise of the future. If this frees us to live, people may wonder why. We may even be on fire a little, like the burning bush that Moses saw. He then said, “What's going on here? Let's have a look!”

This is the second of two reflections drawn from a talk given in May to young men and women discerning their vocation to the religious life.

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