

Hope in the Darkness

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Hi - I'm Alan, and for the last few years I've been working as a lecturer of computing in Bristol. The last year has been pretty crazy in education - so much unpredictability and hardship for students and staff in schools of all types. Yet so many stories of dedication, kindness and solidarity as people rise to the challenge of getting through this year together.

A lot of my work has always been based on Internet technologies, and now ever more so. I think most 'knowledge workers', as we're called, would secretly admit to relying on Google when trying to remember a term, fact or solution to a problem.

There is so much knowledge there, captured from daily human life, that often if I need inspiration or a pointer to what society thinks about a certain subject, I will enter it into Google and look at the text or pictures that are returned.

So that's what I did when Dave gave me the title to work on: "Hope in the darkness". There were many beautiful pictures and inspirational thoughts that were returned, but one quote really caught my attention, from the character Lois Lane of the film Justice League:

"The truest darkness is not the absence of light.
It is the conviction that the light will never return."

There are many distressing stories beginning to emerge as the effects of the pandemic are felt. But I was particularly touched the other day by a BBC news report that focused on the vicars of Church on the Street in Burnley, in the North of England, who are devoting their waking hours to serving and supporting the poor. Many close to the poverty line are driven to desperation and despair by the effects of the pandemic on loss of jobs, reduced social care and delayed benefits. They really can't see any light returning to their situation - they've lost all their hope.

As a Christian, I watched the selflessness and anguish of these volunteer vicars as they gave out all the food they could muster and tried to comfort those who were experiencing such trauma, such as a desperate mother whose daughter had just committed suicide. And I thought - that's where God is. That's Jesus working through those vicars, showing His unconditional, relentless love to those who have hit rock bottom.

But there are not enough of those kind of human angels to go round! In our daily lives, it's easy to see the headlines - another lockdown, rising infection, another retailer closes, and feel that absolute darkness, where it seems light will never return.

How is it possible to have hope in such darkness?

What is hope anyway?

Well, hope is the earnest anticipation that comes with believing something good will happen, it's looking forward to something that has not yet come to pass.

But you can't have hope without faith in something. For example, many have had hope that a COVID vaccine could be developed because they have faith in the scientific community. We trust in doctors and scientists, we put our faith in them to find a solution to the pandemic – our hope.

Now that, wonderfully, at least one vaccine is available, we put our rational faith in it, based on the facts and reports we've been given, that it's going to prevent particularly the vulnerable and elderly from becoming infected. And we hope for the end of the pandemic – something that hasn't happened yet, but that is earnestly anticipated thanks to this scientific breakthrough.

So faith and hope are complementary. Like a good father or mother who promises their daughter a trip to the funfair the next week. The child believes she will go to the funfair, because she trusts her parent's word – that's faith. At the same time, that trust kindles an expression of joy and excitement, even though she can't see it yet. That's hope.

You can't have one without the other. You can't look forward to something if there's no trust or faith, and there's no reason for active faith if there's nothing to look forward to.

Therefore for us to have hope for a positive change in our future, we need to have faith in something, or someone.

I remember playing a game with my kids where they would lean back towards me until they started falling, having to trust that I was there to catch them. This was easy for a 3 year old, but progressively harder at 6, 9 and as a teen. They became more and more aware of the potential result if I didn't catch them, and the fact that despite my promises and best intentions, as a human I was fallible, I could fail.

As a Christian, I put my faith in an invisible God, who I experience through reading the Bible, but also in daily life through prayer and communication.

There are many verses in the Bible that mention hope. One of the classic ones is in the book of Jeremiah, in the Old Testament, chapter 29 verse 11. It says:
"For I know the thoughts that I think towards you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope."
It's a beautiful promise – a God who thinks well of us, who ordains a positive future for us.

However, in many cases with Bible verses, it's important to also

understand the context – often by simply backing up a verse. Here's verse 10 right beforehand:

"For thus says the LORD: After seventy years are completed at Babylon, I will visit you and perform My good word toward you, and cause you to return to this place."

Previously, God's chosen nation of Israel had forgotten their destiny and the God who had set them apart. They were captured by the Babylonians and became an exiled nation, slaves to Babylon. Many Israelites listened to false prophets at the time who told them that they would be back home in months or a few years, but Jeremiah received a lot of persecution for his message. 70 years! That's not what anyone wanted to hear!

I guess you can hear the parallels with our times. A whole society, a whole world in the grip of an evil phenomenon. Many people were initially hoping for a quick fix, a few months of lockdown and it would be dealt with. But the reality is that it takes longer to properly deal with the situation.

But there is hope. Whether in the vaccine, or, more universally for me, in a God who cares and will lead us, will lead me through. But it takes time, there's not often a quick fix.

And in the meantime, God tells us in the Bible He will never leave us. That He loves us for who we are, no matter what we have done, or what has been done to us. That He doesn't want us to live in fear or condemnation. That He knows what we need, and the desires of our hearts, that He will provide for those needs and has good plans for our lives.

Daring to believe the Bible, making these verses a foundation, gives us hope, a hope that endures adversity or unexpected calamity.

In my life there have been many situations where bad stuff happened suddenly, unexpectedly, and I was initially thrown into confusion and fear. But that hope, and the faith I put in God's character, His promises in the Bible, has never let me down.

That's not to say things have always turned out the way I want! No way, sometimes I wonder if God really knows what He's doing. But in most cases it becomes clear later on that He really does. And then for the other times – well, I'm going to ask Him when I see Him, and I suspect He'll sit me down to watch a video of that scene in my life from His perspective, seeing all the links and connections to other situations I was never aware of!

I have enough life experience now to trust He knows best.

So ok – if you have faith in something or someone, you can have hope, which will be like distant friendly harbour lights from the wild stormy ocean.

But it's easy to lose sight of those lights in the midst of a storm. Especially if you're away from home, away from friends and loved

ones, engulfed in a pressured or traumatic situation.

As I thought about this, I was reminded of images of the Second World War, which of course was a recurring theme in the first lockdown, with the parallel of the 75th anniversary of the end of that conflict and this year's global pandemic.

When servicemen and women were sent out to war, to danger and potential injury or death, they left most home comforts behind. But most would bring with them, and treasure, a photo of a loved one, or their family, which they would look at for encouragement in times of quiet and stress. One day, they would tell themselves, I'm returning to my life with you.

Who do you hope to see again when some semblance of normality returns to our lives, where do you hope to go? Finding pictures of loved ones, even missed activities and dream locations remind you of the hope you have set before you.

God is good, and if you trust Him with your life and future, He loves to bring these deep desires to pass, to help you through adversity and, indeed, to bring you into a neverending life trusting and knowing Him, through the hope that we have through faith in Jesus Christ's death and resurrection for us.

So set up those harbour lights – those pictures of hope – the people, places and activities that you are looking forward to return to. Remind yourself of who or what you place your faith in, to inspire your hope. In my experience getting to know God and trusting Him is unbeatable! And in the meantime, find ways to support those around you, who are suffering too, to help them also find hope, just like those amazing pastors in Burnley and so many others who are rarely recognised in our society.

Bye for now!