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Reflection

23 April 2023

St Ronan's Eastbourne

Lamentations **3:19-24**

1 Corinthians **13:1-7 and 13**

John **20:19-31**

9/11 The Twin Towers...

Without hope the people will perish

Hope is a strong driver...

- *It was with hope, the first settlers came from the Pacific to Aotearoa.*
- *It was with hope, the next waves of settlers came to New Zealand from Europe.*
- *It is with hope, immigrants are still coming to Aotearoa New Zealand.*

It was with hope this church was built, and later rebuilt, as a place to worship.

Today, I want to explore hope as I have encountered it within my interactions with the New Zealand health system and with what I have observed as a hospital chaplain.

My journey around hope started with a slipped disk in my back. I was 26. I did physiotherapy (half-heartedly). I tried an osteopath. He also wanted me to do exercises.

I was young and I wanted someone to fix me. Something I have watched in the health system. I suspect we all have this belief, confidence that the medical system will fix us. Like a child's trust in a parent. Or like we see in all the 'medical' programmes on TV. They fix more often than have people die.

So, I talked my GP into sending me to a surgeon. An orthopaedic surgeon. A good man who was young and just getting into private practice. ACC to pay. A private hospital.

Success. Pain free. You see surgery works...!

Two years later the pain was back with a numbness in my leg. I was at the theological hall and sitting in lectures was becoming a challenge. So, in my second year, I lined myself up for surgery again.

This operation did not go well. I had post-operative bleeding. Twenty-four hours after the operation, I was in extreme pain and then slowly lost feeling and strength in my legs. I was whipped back into surgery.



A week later, on my 29th birthday 9/11/87, when the surgeon was doing his rounds, I asked: Would it come right? Would I walk again?

I was married with a 14-month-old daughter and another child on the way. In the 80s, the social expectation was still that a man was the key provider for a family. (According to recent sources, that has not changed much.)

And so, I looked from my bed as to his answer. He said, "I hope so."

His use of the word 'hope' was not what I was looking for. As I sank back into my hospital bed, I began to understand the meaning of hope, for the first time.

It is not certainty. The surgeon was saying it was a possibility that I would come right, and it was also a possibility that I would not.

I began the journey to understanding hope.

Parents often use the word hope when they know it will happen. Teaching children that hope is a surety.

In a Christian funeral service, there is the line. "In the sure and certain hope of the resurrection."

Other traditions talk about being 'assured of our salvation.'

Over the next hours and months, I began to see that the use of sure and certain had coloured my understanding of hope. As a young man, my life was before me. That life was 'full of hope.' It was mine for the taking. That 'full of hope' did not have the possibility of not being fulfilled.

I had entered both operations in the 'sure and certain hope' of recovery. I was going to have my back fixed. 'Sure' and 'Certain' stood as two great towers beside hope.

In my personal 9/11, my 29th birthday, the twin towers of 'Sure' and 'Certain' came down.

I had walked into the hospital, if I had been late, I could have run into the hospital. I left the hospital two weeks later with a brace on my left leg and a walking stick to compensate for the weakness in my right leg. Rather than looking after a vacant parish over the summer, I spent it at home going for a daily walk around the block, and the rest of the time feeling sorry for myself.

It took time for the dust of 'Sure' and 'Certain' to settle.

Hope seemed to have been tamed. It was just now an expression of 'desire' that carried with it a strong dose of 'reality'. Things could go either way. Hope seemed to have been weakened.

While I recovered a lot of what I'd lost over the following year, I have not since enjoyed the joy of running in a field. I am a bit unstable on my feet. I do not like uneven ground. I am sensitive to bad beds and chairs. I have a cocktail of painkillers to use when my back plays up.

Unlike when I was young and wanted someone else to fix me, I take responsibility for my own back care. I take responsibility for my health in general.

Working in a hospital, I have come to see that much of what doctors treat, is related to lifestyle. Diet. Lack of exercise. Lack of sleep, Stress. Disconnect from nature. Disconnection from our home village, our wider family, those we grew up with. We are asking of our bodies things they did not evolve to do. Like sitting in front of a computer screen. Eating highly processed food.

These expectations are based on the unrealistic hope that the medical system will fix us up.

It is far from certain that it can, for this hope is based on Sure and Certain. As I found out, in the end it will always fail to give the desired results.

In the end, all the Kings **nurses** and all the Kings **doctors**, cannot put us back together again.

For me, in taking more responsibility for my own well-being, I am beginning to discover that in the rubble of Sure and Certain there are other towers.

Faith - One of these towers is 'Faith'.

So, let's take a step sideways. Faith is a little word with a massive number of meanings and interpretations given to it.

I often hear people say they can only get through the crises of life with their faith.

Others put it another way. Some cannot understand how people can live without faith. We had a volunteer working with us who, when she come back from visiting patients, would often say "I don't know how they can get through life without faith".

My response to her was to invite her to ask the patients how they got through. What is the faith that supports them? Maybe it was different from hers.

For me, working with people's faith is the core of my job as a chaplain - Not my faith but their faith.

What do I mean by faith? Scholars may find my fluid definition a bit hard to cope with but I find it is a word that has a high resistance to being locked down.

Faith is the beliefs we hold. It is our spirituality. It is our relationship to God, Mother Nature/the environment. It is the roots we have in family and church. It is the values we live by. It is the expectations we hold. It is embedded in the way we relate to one another...

Are you getting the picture? It is this wonderful potpourri of concepts that I call faith. We hold them in different measure and in different ratios.

Some of these concepts come out of our nurture, some from education, some from our culture, the communities to which we belong. Some come out of our evolutionary past.

I see a major part of what I do as a chaplain is to help people connect with their Faith to make sense with what is happening. Actually, most people are quite good at doing that on their own. As a chaplain, I am there to deal with the speed wobbles. Hold space till the shaking stops.

So, back to my story. Walking out of hospital with a brace on my leg and a walking stick. A pregnant wife and a 14-month-old, I had the wobbles both physically and spiritually. My faith had been shaken. Not my relationship with God but, more, my faith in the course of my life, my expectations, my plans, my senses of responsibility, and the calling of God on my life.

These were the things that had been shaken when the towers of Sure and Certain had come down. This is where I had to work at a personal level over the summer. These were what lead me into depression and despair.

What I did find, is that much of what I did believe was still intact. God had not abandoned me. Earlier life crises had taught me that.

And this is what I find in the hospital. Most of the spiritual/faith resources are still intact. People just need a little help with some remedial work to give their faith more resilience.

One of the real joys is meeting people who have this resilience. I remember a woman who had just been told that she had run out of treatment options for her cancer. I expected her to be in a degree of crisis. She wasn't - instead she said that she was fortunate to be able to teach and help her children learn about the final stage of life. Death...

Another woman when told her remaining kidney had failed and that death would be about 2-5 days away, said to me. Hasn't it done well...! I have lived on one kidney for over 50 years. I have had two children and have six grandchildren. Hasn't it done well...!

So, in the rubble of the towers of Sure and Certain I discovered that tower of Faith. Faith Hope and Love...

Would I have been able to stop the tower of faith from wobbling on my own? I think not. It was my wife's support. It was my daughter who at 14 months, just took me in her stride and continued to love me. Over

the summer I had a number of visitors, some of my classmates. And you know some were really good for me. And some...@#\$\$%!

The ones who were best for me were the ones willing to enter into my suffering. Who could hear my despair? Who could hold the space for me to talk, as I found my understanding of what had happened, and then to help me face my future?

Love - The second tower left standing when Sure and Certain have collapsed is love.

I see it time and time again in hospital. It is the families and friends that make a difference in the journey. It is the cleaners and health-care assistants, who bring kindness to their work. It is the compassion that nurses are able to bring, the commitment of the therapists. The positive encouragement.

We often hear in the media of where the health system has failed people. What we do not hear is the loyalty and commitment of the staff to the patients and family.

Sadly, under the stress the health system is now under, the emotional resources of staff can be a bit stretched. This means the love that comes from family and friends is even more important.

It is love in the form of compassion, kindness, consideration along with encouragement, commitment, dedication, loyalty, respect, responsibility...

It is love that gets people through. That is why the strongest tower is **Love**.

Faith hope and Love and the strongest of these is Love.

Hope

So, where does this leave Hope? With Sure and Certain removed, has Hope become just weak and wishy washy...? No...!

In Hope, we now have the backing of faith, that great wealth of beliefs and values of connectedness with God.

In Hope we now have the backing of Love. The recourse of support from community and God.

So, with this backing we can look forward with hope. Not dependant on the desired outcome but with true hope. It is the possibility we want. For without hope of that possibility, we may sink into despair.

And if the thing we hope for does not come to pass, then we will still have the strength of our faith and the support of our loving community. And we can refocus our hope.

Hope for the next task in our lives. And if that next task is preparing for death, then we have Faith and Love with us. And, like the ladies I spoke of earlier, we can use the time preparing our families to the reality of death.

Time for dreaming of what is to come. Dreaming our eternal dreams.

As chaplains, we help people to be grounded in *their* faith - not *ours*. We bring Love alongside all the other love. And in this environment of faith and love, Hope can flourish.

'Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.' Václav Havel

Hope makes sense with the help of Faith and Love.

But towers need to be grounded. They need a firm foundation. Foundations are not airy fairy. They are firm. And what I see is that the foundation is based on being fully informed. Having the facts. Knowing the medical information. Being informed...

The three towers work best with the facts. Not with wishful thinking.

Good hope is built on the foundation of knowledge about what is happening. I needed that. And I needed to talk about it to get it into my head.

And, so, I will at times help people to tell the story of what is going on, what they know of their condition. This sets the foundation for what can be hoped for. How their faith can be applied. And the best way that the love can surround them.

Faith, Hope and Love on a firm foundation.

Without Hope the people perish. That Hope needs to be well grounded. And well supported by Faith and Love.
