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community

The Practice of Hope

Address at the annual Corrymeela Sunday service
at Portsmouth Cathedral, March 13, 2015.

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Below is the text of the sermon preached by Pádraig Ó Tuama at the annual Corrymeela service in Portsmouth on March 13, 2016.

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Good morning to you. It is an honour to be with you here in Portsmouth Cathedral.

I bring with me the prayers and best wishes for you from the Corrymeela community. Today, as the 13th day of the month, we honour all of those who “have given a cup of water to anyone for the sake of God”. Our friends in the Corrymeela support groups in England, and all people of good will gathered in places of faith like this are giving cups of water every day to each other. And we thank God for you and your witness.

A friend of mine died last year. Fr. Gerry Reynolds, the Redemptorist priest who, with others, was such an extraordinary witness to peace and is credited with laying much of the ground for the peace process. He was 80 when he died, and at his funeral — and really there were many funerals that week — one of those speaking said that “Gerry was a man with his feet firmly planted in mid-air.” It is such a quality of being both present to the world and present to imagination that we will speak of today.

Our texts today are texts of hope:

18 Do not remember the former things,  
or consider the things of old.

19 I am about to do a new thing;

now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

I will make a way in the wilderness  
and rivers in the desert.

20 The wild animals will honor me,  
the jackals and the ostriches;  
for I give water in the wilderness,  
rivers in the desert,  
to give drink to my chosen people,  
21 the people whom I formed for myself  
so that they might declare my praise.

It speaks of the relationship between “the things of old”, the “former things” and how to look in the moment for new things. There is surprise and extraordinary hope - wild animals will honour me, jackals and ostriches, water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert. And all for the chosen people.

This is the text from the middle part of Isaiah, written to a people in exile in Babylon, a people whose God, whose land, whose worship whose autonomy and way of life had been taken away under the kingship of Nebuchednezzar. A foreign despot who had treated them as property, and now they are 700 miles away from their homeland, their temple, their everyday and there’s a prophet saying that even in such exile, they must hold on to the hope that their name is known, that they are loved, that even the animals of chaos will be the instruments of praise.

Such hope can seem both cruel and calling. To believe in hope and only see hope/s function as the exact unfolding of hope is to limit hope to some kind of certainty.

What does it mean to hope, especially when you are in difficult circumstances? Is hope merely a project list?

And, in the hope of return, their prophet wrote this song. It's an imagination of a return so great even the mountains, the hills and the trees would break forth with joy.

Is hope a waste if it is not fulfilled in the terms of the dream?

Hope, according to Tolkien, is a way of keeping alive while you are imprisoned. Hope is the quality of imagination, and as such, it is relevant not just for the future but for the present.

"I have claimed that Escape is one of the main functions of fairy-stories, and since I do not disapprove of them, it is plain that I do not accept the tone of scorn or pity with which 'Escape' is now so often used. Why should a man be scorned if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home? Or if he cannot do so, he thinks and talks about other topics than jailers and prison-walls?"<sup>1</sup>

The people to whom the prophet was writing were people in prison. They had been marched hundreds of miles, chained together by chains around their necks and hooks in the cheeks of the one to whom they were chained so that any attempt at escape would result in the further maiming of someone else. They hung their harps

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<sup>1</sup> Tolkien, JRR, "Tree and Leaf", Houghton Mifflin, 1965.

on trees and wondered how they could sing a song of God in a foreign land. Some had, I've read, brought clods of earth in their pockets with them so that they could have a bit of the land from which they could praise their God. Nebuchadnezzar was interested in the intelligentsia of the people, so he'd brought the poets, the artists, those he considered to have culture. A people bereft of hope.

So they sang songs of hope of return, hoping that jackals and hyenas, crows and cactuses, sand and stone would cry out for them on their triumphant way home. It is farfetched, anthropomorphic, and entirely of the nature of poetry, hope and the imagination. They are feeling abandoned, they are not imagining that populations of people will cry out, but the land, that which bore witness to their pain will be the site of their joy.

It didn't happen. What did happen was that Cyrus, a Persian king, conquered the Babylonian king and the Jewish people were sent back to their own city, but not with shouts of joy, just with a different foreign king over them.

So was their song of hope a waste?

No. Hope is not a waste.

Hope is a song sung when everything else says you shouldn't be singing.

Hope is joy.

Hope is a testimony that says 'even if it doesn't come true, I'll live like it might'.

Hope is what helps us survive.

Hope is little light.

Emily Dickinson said that;

“Hope” is the thing with feathers -  
That perches in the soul -  
And sings the tune without the words -  
And never stops - at all -

And sweetest - in the Gale - is heard -  
And sore must be the storm -  
That could abash the little Bird  
That kept so many warm -

I’ve heard it in the chillest land -  
And on the strangest Sea -  
Yet - never - in Extremity,  
It asked a crumb - of me.

Hope gives, and it builds on what it gives. It does not ask that it will be turned into pure reality, it can function with integrity in the realm of the imagination where our dream of what should be true can keep us alive.

In such a way, hope is of the function of imagination and, as such, of the kingdom of God. Hope makes those of us who do not know the best way to live in a world of burden find ways to live and pray and act and be generous — not because we understand everything that’s happening, or because we have any certainty really, but because it’s a good way to live, and because living hopefully creates something in the present that might inspire something of the future.

Corrymeela was such a witness to hope. In 1965, Ray Davey was chaplain in Queens University in Belfast. He discerned — correctly — that the tensions of sectarianism, unrest, demand for rights, and fear were only going to increase. “We need a place of meeting” he seemed to imagine, and he began looking, as did others, and they found a place that was 50 miles away, cost money they didn’t have, and their hope caused them to imagine that it might be worthwhile. It wasn’t exactly what they imagined, but it was enough, and perhaps better. People came. People came and instead of disagreements turning to destruction, disagreements turned to substance and they argued with substance, formed political parties that disagreed with each other without resorting to violence.

It is in the time of the jackal and the hyena, the chaos monsters of the land and sea that we turn to that which springs eternal.

We can dampen such hope because we think we are called to be realists. but as people of the book, we are called to be enlivened by the dream of who we can be. The dream that saw beatitude both at the beginning and at the heart of humanity; the dream that sees a forsaken brother having his feet washed by a friend in the midst of a time of torture; the dream that sees people singing in chorus when their feet are bound in chains; the dream that says that if we only rely on evidence, we will not be people of promise; if we only build on certainty then we will be dismayed; if we only go by past experience then we will endlessly repeat the past; if we can listen to the song of the heart, even and especially when we doubt that song, if we can listen to the doubted song of the heart then maybe we will make something up that will in its turn contain and carry us to a far shore.

We seek evidence of things hoped for, not strict certainty. The gospel texts of preparing a beloved friend the week before his torture for being sweet smelling and anointed for that which is so inhumane speak to us of the faculty of imagination functioning especially in times when imagination seems either irrelevant or a luxury. We are called to be people with one eye on the firm realities of the world and the other eye firmly planted on the realm of what we might call “make-believe”. So what if it’s make-believe, many peace processes are build on the dream of the people.

If we think that we cannot build on dreams, we are abandoning ourselves to build on nightmares. What is the quality of our dream of imagination of who we might be? How can we read politics with the quality of poetry, looking at the everyday circumstances of places like Belfast, Portsmouth, London, Dublin, Glasgow, Cork, Cardiff, Galway, rural and urban, new arrivals and long-term residents, how can we look at these places in the reality of their lives and with the beauty of hope.

In her poem “Concerning the prayer I cannot make” the American poet Jane Mead looks at the urban river, with rusty cars on its brook, old t-shirts, rubbish and the light on the water:

I come here every day  
to be beneath this bridge,  
to sit beside this river,  
so I must have seen the way the clouds just slide  
  
under the rusty arch—  
without snagging on the bolts,



how they are borne along on the dark water— I must have noticed their fluent  
speed  
and also how that tattered blue T-shirt remains snagged on the crown  
of the mostly sunk dead tree  
despite the current's constant pulling.

She watches the world, she watches the dead tree, the light on the broken window  
of a car and says:

On the far bank the warehouse lights  
blink red, then green, and all the yellow machines with their rusted scoops and  
lifts sit under a thin layer of sunny frost.

And look—  
my own palm—  
there, slowly rocking.  
It is my pale palm—  
palm where a black pebble  
is turning and turning.

Listen—  
all you bare trees  
burrs  
brambles  
pile of twigs  
red and green lights flashing muddy bottle shards  
shoe half buried—listen

listen, I am holy.

She is saying that there is a holiness at the heart of the world, a holiness in the midst of our rubbish tips, our broken hearts, our failed policies, our violences, our embraces go deeper than our horror, and can nurture the imagination of dance for a world that is limping.

## **The Corrymeela Prayer for Courage:**

Courage comes from the heart  
and we are always welcomed by God  
the Croí of all being.

We bear witness to our faith  
knowing that we are called  
to live lives of courage, love and reconciliation  
in the ordinary and extraordinary moments  
of each day.

We bear witness, too, to our failures  
and our complicity in the fractures of our world.

May we be courageous today.

May we learn today.

May we love today.

Amen.

A reminder: you can find information about all of these events on

[www.corrymeela.org/events](http://www.corrymeela.org/events)