

## Foundations in Christianity with Father Michael Himes Hope

In many ways, hope is the most difficult of the great Christian virtues to speak about because it's so widely misunderstood. By many it's thought to be a kind of optimism: "Everything will turn out for the best." But that's not hope at all. Hope is best understood as Christian Realism. It's not about seeing things through rose-colored glasses. It's about seeing things as they really are.

Hope is part of what the theologian, Karl Rahner, described as the greatest single service that the gospel of Christian Realism does; it helps us avoid the errors of despair and false utopianism.

What is utopianism? Utopianism is the idea that it's possible to construct a world, a community, a church, a business, a country, a school, a family, in which everything will be simply perfect. The idea that we could get everything right. This is a profound mistake. There are no utopias. The word itself tells you where they are: nowhere. The word is Greek for "nowhere." No such place ever exists. No such possibilities are ever going to be fully realized.

There's a play by T. S. Elliott, "The Cocktail Party," where the character Celia says to her counselor – she gets one important root to her problem, she says: she was raised without any notion of sin – to disbelieve in sin. Not that it was ever mentioned... anything wrong was either bad form or a psychological problem. These are the standard explanations for all the problems in our society. If people are being selfish, foolish, greedy, we just need to tell them what they're doing wrong and make them change. We either need to educate them so they can correct their mistakes, or we need to find the right drug, medical procedure or therapy. The standard solutions to problems of pain and suffering, evil and injustice, are on the one hand, educate them better or correct them more strongly, or on the other hand, give them the right therapy. We only need to find out who's the source of the problem, and make them change. You find out who's oppressing you, and you join the right liberation group. Or on the other hand, find the right therapy and solve the problem that way. It's always a matter of education or a matter of therapy.

It's not that these two approaches are wrong – but they're incomplete. They don't allow for the idea of "sin." It's not that we don't **know** what the right thing is, not that we're psychologically **incapable** of choosing or of discerning what is good and true, loving and just. It's that we choose to do what meets **our** goals – and our goals are not always the good, the true, the just. Sin is a real issue.

So that is utopianism: the idea that there is some program of social reform, education, or therapy that will work, that will make everything right. The idea that we could fix everything and the Kingdom of God would be complete.

Father Himes thinks about how Christians speak about "building the Kingdom of God," and he thinks that we've mistaken ourselves as the architects. He urges us to remember that it's God's Kingdom we're talking about, God founds it, God builds it, God completes it. We may be workers, but many times we, as believers, fall into a kind of Christian Utopianism. If only we could correct

such-and-such, if only we could get people to do x, y or z, ... then everything would be fine. The Kingdom of God would be complete.

The alternative is despair. Despair is not only a temptation but the very center of the problem of evil and sin. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> canto of the first part, the Inferno section, of Dante's Divine Comedy, Virgil is leading Dante through the entry to Hell. Over the gate they find the inscription, "Leave hope all you who enter here." The entry to hell, for Dante, is hopelessness. The start of evil is despair. When you get to the deepest pit of hell, Satan is, not like Milton's stormy rebel – "Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven!", Dante's Satan is utterly silent. He is locked in the ice that is formed by his own tears. The center of hell is not flame, it's ice. There is no warmth; it is absolutely cold. Instead of Milton's monster of ambition, pride and disobedience, Dante's Satan is a monster of despair. The entry to hell is despair, and the depth of hell is the icy tears of fruitless despair.

What leads us deeply into sin is the conviction that – good is impossible. There is no point in trying. Love ultimately is impossible. Fidelity is hopeless. Courage is beyond us. Wisdom is something we'll never achieve. A real desire to grow closer to God and our neighbor goes nowhere. Forgiveness can never be received. There is no possibility of change.

In Goethe's Faust, the Devil, Mephistopheles, describes himself as the "spirit who says 'No.'" --And that correctly; for all things that are come to an end, and better there never should have been anything. The Devil is the spirit who says "No" to all possibility. Is there anything good? –No. Anything true? –No. Any ground for hope? –No. Any possibility of love? –No. Any possibility of forgiveness? –No. Any value to anything that exists? –No. To me? To you? –No! It's all garbage and therefore better that it should never have existed! It is the willing of not being, the denial of the possibility of goodness, the rejection of all hope. That is what despair is.

That's what we're confronted with, these two alternatives: utopianism and despair. Either presumptuous utopianism, "We can do it - it all depends on us!," or hopelessness. It's hopeless, impossible, can't be done, all illusion, there is no possibility.

In between, according to Karl Rahner, lies the great service that proclaiming the gospel performs: the proclamation of the Christian Realism of Hope, the possibility of seeing that things can be transformed.

Hope is not about maintaining that everything comes out right. It's not about shutting our eyes to real problems, real challenges, real evils, real injustices, real weakness in ourselves and others. Hope has nothing to do with rose-colored glasses. Hope is seeing things as they are, recognizing that they are deeply imperfect, and at the same time, that they are loved and held in being by God, and that their imperfection can be brought into deeper and deeper closeness to God.

At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Friedrich Schleiermacher was a protestant pastor and theologian in Germany. He had a very happy marriage and family life except for the fact that his son, Nathaniel, died at a young age. Schleiermacher preached at the graveside of his young son. His wise and brave sermon began by expressing his gratitude for the support and comfort offered by family, friends, parishioners and acquaintances. But he remarked that some of

the things said, by way of comfort, struck him as being mistaken and, as a pastor and theologian, he felt compelled to challenge them.

Some people had said that life can be very painful and in dying so young, Nathaniel was being spared life's greifs and challenges. Schleiermacher's reply to this was that life also contains great joy, beauty, and splendor. Nathaniel would be missing all of this too. So Schleiermacher disallowed this explanation of how God's love and goodness was found in the midst of terrible loss.

Other people said that we must be obedient to the will of God. We must accept God's will, whatever it is. Schleiermacher's response to this was to ask, who are we to say what God's will is? Who are we to claim to be able to read the mystery of God's will? For anyone to say, this is the will of God... Schleiermacher countered that this is blasphemous - to claim too much knowledge of God.

So what could Schleiermacher say, as a pastor and theologian who saw his young son die? He said, "We must be willing to allow ourselves to be embraced by mystery and to embrace the mystery back, always allowing it to remain mystery. On the one hand, we know the reality of the loss of Nathaniel, on the other hand, we know the depth and the profundity of the love of God. How those two are held together, I don't know. And it would be false and wrong of me to claim to know too easily." Schleiermacher was not going to grasp at optimism, but would continue to live in hope.

We, as Christians, tend to be a people who emphasize the resurrection and forget Good Friday. Father Himes says, it's true that we read in John 6 that "anyone who eats my flesh and drinks my blood will have life eternal," but "Jesus does die, and so do you, and so do I." Death is the certain destiny of all of us.

If that's true, then where is hope? Hope is not the escape from death, it's the transformation of the meaning of death. It's not saying that evils, weaknesses, griefs and sorrows aren't real – it's saying that they are not the ultimate reality. Their meaning is transformed and changed. The resurrection didn't do away with the cross. Easter doesn't blot out Good Friday; it changes its meaning. It transforms it. And that's what hope is about.

Hope is about seeing things the way Christians claim they're meant to be seen: imperfect, weak, created, fallible, finite, frequently foolish, often sinful, sometimes terribly painful. And yet, all of it redeemed, transformed, held in being by a God who is absolute love. That's what hope is about.

It's not about saying, "We can do it all!," but it's not about saying, "There's nothing we can do; nothing has value." Christian Realism maintains that we can't do everything, but we can do something. It won't be enough, but it will be necessary. It won't be the solution, but it will be part of the solution. And that solution is already being worked out by the God who **does** do enough! By the God who does everything. That is what our hope is about.

It is not optimism, not utopianism, not presumption. It's not despair, it is not the gospel that tells us that nothing is possible. It is about seeing things as they really are. It's about Christian Realism. It's ultimately about that all important value – the ability to go on. In the conviction that God who is behind us, is also still before us. We are, after all, a people of Hope.