Imagine that you were one of the disciples. Words would be quite inadequate to describe your feelings of devastation and despair as the events of that final Friday unfurled. You had enjoyed the most wonderful three years – surrendered yourself willingly to the ideas of the most charismatic of men – left an old way of life behind – a home – a family – a job and in that loss discovered a whole new set of values. In short your life had been transformed. Now there was nothing. A long empty Sabbath had followed the crucifixion – a day imbued with the gnawing pain of profound grief and an overwhelming sense emptiness and anticlimax. All hope had gone.

How must they have felt on that first Easter Sunday? Again imagine the emotions that must have surged through Mary of Magdalene when she met Jesus in the garden – having despaired yet again at the sight of the empty tomb. Imagine the disbelief then excitement as she told his followers of her discovery. The joy, the wonder and the hope. 

The joy, the wonder and the hope............. the hope that something of those wonderful years would be rekindled – the hope that something of what they believed would now survive - the hope that their lives would regain a sense of meaning and purpose.

Now 2000 years later that hope lives on in countless religious denominations for, surely, one of the important functions of any church is to maintain hope in the lives of its congregation.

So what is hope? How should we define it? How does it differ from those other projections – such as optimism or ambition or aspiration? The OED rather drily defines it as ‘an expectation of something desired’. In David Copperfield, Charles Dickens, in my opinion undervalues hope when he refers to it as a ‘lazy trustfulness’. By contrast many others adopt a more positive stance. So for instance, in King Richard 111 Shakespeare writes:

‘True hope is swift, and flies with swallow’s wings;
Kings it makes gods, and meaner creatures kings.’

At its most potent hope is more tangible and visceral – a quality that is an intrinsic part of our being – our nature. Something that is ‘hard-wired’ into the human soul. Optimism is a rather vague notion of confidence or buoyancy about the future; it’s rather passive. By contrast hope is an active virtue. Implicit within it is the sense of a goal – an ambition – something that we can and want to achieve – something that we can make happen provided that we are courageous, purposeful and determined.

Hope is inextricably linked with the human condition and as such is at risk of becoming debased. Every milestone in our lives is gilded with the essence of hope – from the wishes made when our children blow out the candles on their birthday cakes to our new year’s resolutions. The arrival of adolescence with its turbulent and perplexing emotions unleashes further unanticipated hopes. Thus the young David Copperfield captures the essence of these when he develops a passion for Miss Shepherd, one of the ‘Miss Nettingall’s’ young ladies:

‘The Misses Nettingall’s come to the Cathedral too. I cannot look upon my book, for I must look upon Miss Shepherd. When the choristers chant I hear Miss Shepherd. In the service I mentally insert Miss Shepherd’s name; I put her in among the Royal Family.’
‘Good wishes’ and their inferred hopes are the inevitable accompaniment to ‘rites of passage’. However, each of us has our own hopes ranging from immature and personal ones such as those expressed by the young David Copperfield to those aspirations that can shape every aspect of our lives. They are our perpetual companions.

Later as the years begin to take their toll those hopeful injunctions acquire more portentous undertones. Hope is the inevitable companion of all illness and so often provides that gleam of solace that enables us to carry on – offering the prospect of recovery if we are fortunate or at least comfort and relief from suffering. It is there right to the end – as movingly depicted in this short poem written by Betty Roddie. Betty was the wife of physiologist. She died of breast cancer at the age of 39 on midsummer day in 1974 and illustrated her final journey with a series of poems. ‘The Meeting’ is the last one she wrote just a few days before her death:

We meet at last then. I never thought to
See you, or even to know you, that was for others.
Nothing dramatic or sudden to warn me
Of your presence. You’d been there all along.
Waiting, expecting me not to be so stupid
When you gave me so many hints that you were there.
Now we can be easy with each other.
Let us be patient for the right time.

Your name is Death, I know, stay if you wish
Be patient with me, and one day we
Might be friends.

For many doctors and patients hopes can deceive. ‘False hope’ can arise from the torment of turbulent emotions as someone struggles to come to terms with the immense connotations of serious illness. You will I am sure be aware of those who having been advised of a terminal diagnosis – deny all when in that initial state of shock. Others reject the unwelcome news and embark on a futile quest with a succession of practitioners in the vain hope of overturning the unwanted diagnosis. As a doctor it is all too easy to compound the illusion and avoid an overt discussion about the illness and its outcome. To quote Voltaire: ‘one day everything will be well, that is our hope; today everything is fine, that is our illusion’. The professional dilemma arises in choosing the ‘right’ time for the discussion and then having the courage to proceed with it. The skill is to explain the facts and their implications with sensitivity and without extinguishing all possibility of hope but equally avoiding raising unrealistic expectations.

But hope has another dimension. Each of us has dreams, fantasies and ambitions. Sometimes these seem to erupt into our consciousness from where we know not; they can appear illogical and puzzling. They can disrupt the orderliness of our lives and on rare occasions can even jeopardise them. But at their best they can impel us to take action – to support causes – to act as the talisman for a better world. Most of the great advances of the world began as a ‘hope’.
The charisma, teachings and example of Jesus changed the world. I would hesitate to compare him with another but of course we can all think of those who by the force of their personality and ideas have irrevocably altered the course of events for humanity. In our own denomination – as we learnt a few weeks ago from Bottand’s service - Michael Servetus, Faustus Socinus and Francis David provided inspiration for us that continues to this day. Thinking of contemporary society we all will have our preferred candidates – but for me Gandhi and Martin Luther King stand out as giants in this respect. However, sometimes we are privileged to witness such phenomena in our personal lives. When returning from Morocco in January we were dismayed to be the victims of delayed departure at Rabat airport. The hours slowly crept by. There were many Moroccans on the flight among whom was a young Mother travelling alone with a toddler and a baby only few weeks old trying her best to soothe them during the long ordeal. She occupied one of the few seats that were available at that part of the terminal. A middle-aged Moroccan man approached her and asked her to give up her seat so that he might sit down [a custom we assumed]. The Mother was rescued from her plight by the spirited intervention of another Moroccan lady – who pointed out in no uncertain terms the needs of the Mother. With her proud victory we immediately gained insight into the Arab spring. All were full of admiration for the courage of the protagonist.

In this sense hope is aligned with a capacity to stand aside from the present and look into the future and to imagine oneself as part of it. In his acclaimed essay – ‘A Defence of Poetry’, Percy Shelley argued that the perception and imagination of poets aligned with the beautiful and articulate evocations of their thoughts was a powerful force for moral good.

‘ For he [the poet] not only beholds intensely the present as it is, and discovers those laws according to which present things ought to be ordered, but he beholds the future in the present, and his thoughts are the germs of the flower and the fruit of latest time’

‘But poetry defeats the curse which binds us to be subjected to the accident of surrounding impressions. And whether it spreads its own figured curtain, or withdraws life’s dark veil from before the scene of things, it equally creates for us a being within our being. It makes us the inhabitants of a world to which the familiar world is a chaos. It reproduces the common universe of which we are portions and percipients, and it purges from our inward sight the film of familiarity which obscures from us the wonder of our being.’

Although men and women have always dreamed we are now in a potentially more powerful position to exercise this function. We enjoy greater longevity and health than our ancestors, we are not distracted to the same extent by illness, we have higher levels of literacy and education than our forebears, and thanks to the revolution in information technology we have an incomparably greater database of knowledge to fuel our thoughts and the means to share and develop them with one another. This strategic thinking borne of imagination and reflection is a uniquely human attribute. We are luckier than so many of our predecessors who lived their short lives at the mercy of extrinsic factors – the elements, poverty and the actions of despots.

Since classical times – and possibly before them – man’s hope for the future and the ideal society has been expressed in a variety of utopian constructions which contrasted with the mores of that epoch. Thus Thomas More described in detail a complex community living on an island. Later in the 18th Century the writings of Rousseau, Voltaire and Condorcet fuelled
the imagination of society of that era presaging the great revolutions in America and France. Only a few years later in America the philosophy of the transcendentalists took effect and by using the arts as a vehicle for its cause – gently challenged the prevailing order. Many of the ‘Transcendentalists’ were effective protagonists of a different society with an emphasis on religious freedom, improved conditions in the home and at work and the extension of educational provision to all. In the United Kingdom at this time some enlightened industrialists created Utopian communities for their employees with housing of good quality, schools and libraries. Thus Titus Salt, to cite one example, created the community of Saltaire in West Yorkshire for his textile workers. In this way Salt and his contemporaries realised the immediate hopes of their workforce and those of generations to come.

For me the thread of hope which runs through these broad scenarios is the seed bed of enablement and change. Our view of our world and our propensity to question and challenge it leads us in turn to envision a better future. In his book ‘The Phenomenon of Man’ [Le Phenomene Humain] published in the 1930s Pierre Teilhard de Chardin – French philosopher and Jesuit priest– argued that the development of consciousness proceeds in tandem with evolution. He proposed that there is a biological progression from simple sensory consciousness of external phenomena to the power of reflection which we believe to be an innately human characteristic. Teilhard de Chardin then introduced the exciting notion that humankind might evolve still further with an increasingly heightened sensitivity to the consciousness of other beings resulting finally in a full moral conscience. Later he developed this hypothesis still further postulating that the whole material universe would tend to a state of unity embracing a collective world mind or ‘noosphere’. It is an intriguing and attractive hypothesis that with time man’s evolutionary trajectory might encompass the development of altruism. At first sight this seems to be supported at least in a casual way by the adoption of more liberal values by western society since the enlightenment and its commitment to individual liberty. Of course one must concede that dreadful and despotic deeds have continued to be perpetrated during this period – which in evolutionary terms is a mere blink of the eye. Many biologists would contend that this sort of species advantage is an illusion and that most examples of altruism can be explained by some direct benefit to the individual concerned without conferring an evolutionary benefit. However, I believe that one can argue that a capacity to hope may offer an evolutionary advantage to those in whom this quality is manifest. For ‘hope’ can inspire and compel someone to better things and thus be a powerful force for the benefit of the species as a whole.

Time and continued scholarship may ultimately provide us with more knowledge – and certainly with more questions. Come what may hope remains an important component in our lives just as it was for the followers of Jesus after the resurrection. One shudders to imagine the bleakness of a life without it. To quote AC Grayling: ‘you discover more about a person when you learn about his hopes than when you count his achievements, for the best of what we are lies in what we hope to be.’

Amen

Now let us sing our final hymn ‘Jerusalem’ No 210 – an evocation of hope if ever there was one.