

Trinity 4 2015

‘Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?’

All of us from time to time have been in the position of the messengers, urging someone to accept the reality of their situation. ‘Give up, it’s over.’

The situations vary, it could be wanting a big multinational company or perhaps a hospital to accept that they have made a terrible mistake, it could be accepting that a marriage really is finished, it could be accepting that you have to drop out of an important race or climbing expedition, or it could be accepting that it is not worth attempting yet another round of fertility treatment, but the essence of the message is identical: ‘there is no point in going on’.

When Jairus ran out of his house to go and find Jesus, there might already have been people who would have said to him ‘there’s no point, she’s dying’. But he hoped against hope that Jesus could change something. Then, when those messengers came and told him that his little girl had died, his spirit must have crumpled. But Jesus overheard and quietly gave him hope once more.

If we had been there and if we had been a friend of Jairus, would we have been furious at the prospect of someone offering what we would regard as false hope, persuading Jairus to clutch at straws? If that had been our attitude, we would, on that occasion, have been proved wrong, for the girl lived. Jairus, by refusing to give up hope, was in the right place at the right time and the outcome was a miraculous recovery.

Jesus was able to offer hope because he really could make a difference. He had the power to heal, to restore life. If Jairus, or someone like him, came and knocked on our door with a similar request, we might feel out of our depth. Yet, there are many times when we can make a difference, and when we should offer hope, even in those situations that appear to be hopeless. We could pay for a malaria net or two for a child, we could refuse to buy fish that may have been caught by factory ships. Our actions provide hope, they bring about a change. But if we are truly honest with ourselves, although we care about poverty in other countries and overfishing, our hearts are far more engaged when it is a situation affecting someone we know. What can we do when someone we care about is in trouble, when our partner has a cancer that has spread, or our daughter’s marriage is on the rocks? Is it right to offer hope when all seems hopeless?

The hope that we offer has to be real. We can offer support, a non-judgemental listening ear. We can provide practical help – childcare or shopping. We can entertain, go on outings to the cinema, or theatre. And, above all, we can pray. We can offer the very real hope of Christ, the knowledge that with him all things are possible – not certain! He is not ours to command. But a real hope. Our actions, all our actions, however small, will make a difference. So we offer what we can, but we do not pretend to offer what is not possible. We are not offering wishful thinking. ‘It will all be alright’ is meaningless unless there is something to back up the statement.

There may, of course, be times when we feel we can do nothing. When we are very low, even our ability to pray can fail us. At those times we must be especially careful, for one thing we must never do is to destroy someone else’s hope. Instead we must ask another to pray, accept that we must step back so that our pessimism does not become infectious.

The trouble is that from experience we know that even when the flame of hope is kept alive, sometimes marriages end, partners die, those things we fear most actually happen. Not every dying 12 year old girl is brought back to life by Jesus. It is at those times that our hope becomes even more important. Then our hope in Christ can be the catalyst that enables others to continue. There can be laughter and joy after divorce. There can be hope after death. For with Christ there is healing, not just physical healing, but healing of the heart and the soul. It is the healing of forgiveness and reconciliation. It enables us to forgive all that has hurt us, whether that be a person, an institution, or life itself.

As it says in the Wisdom of Solomon

God created all things so that they might exist;
the generative forces of the world are wholesome.

Life is good, it is wonderful and beautiful, and occasionally scary and dangerous, but it is never without hope. For we have been shown through the resurrection, the way into the moment of creation, when hope is eternal and all things are possible. In that moment the fabric of life is reshaped, restored, renewed.

Past sorrow cannot be undone, but lives can be rebuilt. Hate, fear and war will leave a legacy, but it can be one shaped on forgiveness and reconciliation.

Hope can triumph. And where there is hope, there faith and love can be found. Amen.