

## EEA General Assembly 2013 – Session 4 – Normal Crisis & Extraordinary Hope

I come to my last session with you and I want to thank you again for the invitation to share my reflections on the crisis in Europe today. This is not the first time I have shared this material but this invitation has given me the opportunity to reflect much more deeply about the subject. Specifically, in preparing the introductory session, it encouraged me to look back at Europe's history and to reflect on the faith and hope of previous generations of believers in the midst of their moments of crisis. And it also encouraged me to reflect more deeply on the theological and missiological dimensions of crisis and hope.

As I mentioned yesterday, I teach a master's programme in European Mission at Redcliffe College in the UK, and I am constantly reminding my students that I don't just want to know what other people think about a given topic, I want to know what they think and I want to know what their missiological reflections are, what the missiological consequences of what we have learnt might be. Well that is what I am going to present now, because despite appearances to the contrary, I am extraordinarily hopeful about Europe and God's purposes for our continent.

So bringing it all together, what have we learnt over the last couple of days, that Europe's present crisis has many dimensions and a crisis in any given dimension often leads to crisis in another. We saw that looking back in history, crisis in each and every one of these dimensions has been a common experience for most previous generations of Europeans. And we have reflected on the resilience of the church to not just survive but thrive in the midst of crisis.

In the last two sessions we have considered in detail each of the five dimensions of crisis in Europe today, how Europe's tomorrow may look in the light of current realities, and have given some time to considering how the churches of Europe might respond in this context of crisis.

So it will not surprise you that I say that the first thing we must do is to embrace crisis as normal. We can celebrate the last sixty years of peace, prosperity and stability in most of Europe, we should work and pray that it might endure, but we must not forget that it is an extraordinary anomaly. The

normal experience of the church has been one of crisis. Crisis is the normal setting, the normal context in which the church undertakes its life and mission.

And the good news is that the Christian scriptures provide us with an extraordinary treasure trove of resources for life and mission in crisis.

Consider for a moment the Old Testament. Just mentally fast-forward through the chronology of the OT – the experience of the patriarchs, the generation of the exodus, the time of the judges, and the kings, the division of the kingdom, the exile and the return which we have been hearing about these days. Was there ever a generation of God's people that did not know crisis?

Or the New Testament, where persecution either by Judaizers or Romans is the context for many of the letters and where the book of Revelation (to which we will return in a moment) sought to bring comfort to a people in crisis under the oppressive yoke of the Roman Empire.

Taken together we might consider the Bible as a collection of scriptures written by and for a people in crisis. Lots of companies now have a crisis manual. Well the Bible was the original crisis manual, telling us how previous generations lived in times of crisis that we might learn from them, follow their example when it's a good one, avoid it when it's a bad one, and perhaps more important than anything else, appropriate the hope that enables us to live faithfully for God when passing through the fire of crisis.

For just as crisis is the normal experience of every generation of Christians hope is their normal response. Now before I say anything else here I just want to clarify what I mean by normal. To say that hope is the normal Christian response to crisis is not to say that it is ordinary. On the contrary, as I indicated in my general title for this session: normal crisis and extraordinary hope, I believe Christian hope to be anything but ordinary. Here biology can help us because in biology "normal" means function in a natural way, without abnormalities nor deficiencies. And in an analogous way hope is the natural response of Christian faith in crisis. When a woman is pregnant the normal or natural result is a healthy baby. It is normal but it is also extraordinary. Likewise hope is the normal but extraordinary response to crisis for the Christian.

No matter what the context of crisis may be, the Christian normal response is always the same – hope in Jesus Christ, for the Christian believes, as Apostle Paul expressed it in Colossians 1, that “through him” God will “reconcile to himself, all things, where things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross”. That is our ultimate hope, and that of all previous generations of Christian believers, hope in the reconciliation of all things in Christ.

But Christian hope is more than just a distant hope of future salvation. Hope engages with the present, with the world as it is and offers the possibility of transformation. We don’t just have hope when we die, but hope in our present crisis. From the infinite riches of God’s future for the world we may draw hope that can be transformative in the present. But for that, hope must be renewed, actualized, re-envisioned, contextualized and communicated to our constantly changing world.

We have a tremendous example of that in the New Testament, in the Revelation of St John. We recall that John was taken up into heaven and given a vision of how things looked from heaven, a vision of the future but one that was intended to shed light on the present, to contextualize the Christian hope for the harsh realities of the Roman Empire.

But there is a second aspect to this. The message of John’s vision did not only help the first century Christians to appropriate eternal hope to comfort them in their crisis, but it also engaged with the secular hope of the age challenging it head on with another vision of reality. The Roman Empire presumed on universal end eternal rule. The title of “Eternal City” wasn’t something dreamed up by the Italian Department of Tourism, it was first called that by a Roman poet called Tibullus who wrote in the late first Century BC. Romans truly thought their empire would last forever, that it was their “manifest destiny” to rule over the rest of the world.

Rome was their great hope, and hence, cult to the Emperor, with the declaration “Caesar is Lord” and an annual incense offering was a requirement for all who lived under Rome’s authority. Yet John’s vision challenged this head on. The Lordship of Christ, expressed most pointedly in the simplest of phrases “Jesus is Lord” and by implication “Caesar is not”, was a direct

challenge to Rome's pretension to universal and eternal rule. It was radically subversive and that's why many thousands of Christians were martyred for declaring it.

So the Revelation of John is a model of this dual function of Christian hope in the midst of crisis. The hope of eternity is drawn from the future bringing comfort in the midst of crisis, and at the same time, the secular hope of Rome is challenged by with the alternative hope in Christ as true Lord.

#### 4. Ultimate hope and proximate hope

Here I need to acknowledge the insight of Richard Bauckham who makes a very helpful distinction between what he calls ultimate hope and proximate hope.

I have decided to reproduce Bauckham's definitions in full here. Bauckham defines ultimate hope in this way: "By ultimate hope I mean the final achievement of all God's purposes for his creation when he brings this temporal history to its end and takes the whole creation, redeemed and renewed, into his own eternal life. If we believe in the God of Jesus Christ, that is an unconditional hope that rests on God's faithfulness to his creation and the promise made in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead".

Ultimate hope is inconceivable humanly speaking. It is beyond human comprehension. More to the point it is unconditional, not contingent on human obedience but rather on God's sovereign purpose. For that very reason the apostle Paul calls it "a hope that does not disappoint" (Romans 5:5) because it cannot and will not be frustrated, despite all evidence to the contrary.

It is the hope that underpins countless hymns and songs of worship, like the final two verses of William Fullerton's hymn "I cannot tell".

I cannot tell how He will win the nations,  
How He will claim His earthly heritage,  
How satisfy the needs and aspirations  
Of East and West, of sinner and of sage.  
But this I know, all flesh shall see His glory,  
And He shall reap the harvest He has sown,  
And some glad day His sun shall shine in splendour  
When He the Saviour, Saviour of the world is known.

I cannot tell how all the lands shall worship,  
When, at His bidding, every storm is stilled,  
Or who can say how great the jubilation  
When all the hearts of men with love are filled.  
But this I know, the skies will thrill with rapture,  
And myriad, myriad human voices sing,  
And earth to Heaven, and Heaven to earth, will answer:  
At last the Saviour, Saviour of the world is King!

In contrast, says Bauckham, “Proximate hopes are all the hopes we have for the temporal future. If they are fully formed Christian hopes, they, like ultimate hope, will be based on what God has done for us in Jesus Christ and on the images we are given of the goal that God is going ultimately to realise for this world. Our proximate hopes are for what we can desire and envisage that reflects, within this world, the ultimate hope of a new creation. They are on the way to ultimate hope, but must always, of course, fall short of it”.

Proximate hope is contingent on human action. It is conditional. And it is subject to the effects of human evil that continue as part of our current context until our ultimate hope is achieved. So our proximate hopes, even ones which are in line with God’s will, can be frustrated in a way that our ultimate hope cannot.

So how are ultimate hope and proximate hope related? Bauckham’s answer is this: “Ultimate hope can fund proximate hope. It enables us to work in the direction of God’s purpose, knowing that we are working with God’s purpose, working with the grain of the universe. But distinguishing ultimate hope and proximate hopes enables us to be appropriately modest and realistic about what we can hope for here and now in particular contexts.”

In other words, Christian confidence in our ultimate hope can fund or fuel our present proximate hopes. It can inspire us to work and live in a particular way. And that is precisely what we find throughout scripture where the word of hope breaks in and speaks to a people in crisis comfort but also a call to live faithfully. Think of the letter to the exiles in Jeremiah 29 with its call to “seek

the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile”, or Paul’s words to the Corinthians: “Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain. (1 Corinthians 15:58).

But my final words to you are to remind you of the heart of the message of extraordinary hope for today’s Europeans. When Paul was in Athens he preached in the marketplace and this was the result: “A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, “What is this babbling trying to say?” Others remarked, “He seems to be advocating foreign gods.” They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.” Acts 17:18

From there Paul was taken to the Areopagus and he bent over backwards to contextualize his message of hope, using quotes from Greek poets and references from their understanding of religion, but in the end it was all to earn the opportunity to preach the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. That was his unchanging message. That ultimate hope in the resurrection fuelled everything that Paul said and did with proximate hope.

Crisis is the normal setting for Christian life and mission in Europe. But we have an extraordinary message of extraordinary hope. I want to conclude with a story about Lesslie Newbigin. Newbigin was ordained by the Church of Scotland and went as a missionary to India in 1936, becoming a bishop of the Church of South India. In 1974 he returned to a Britain undergoing rapid secularization. And he dedicated the final twenty years of his life to considering how to communicate the gospel to post-Christian western culture. On one occasion Newbigin was interviewed on the radio and he was asked the question: are you optimistic or pessimistic about the future of the church? Newbigin was silent. He said nothing for ten or fifteen seconds which of course is an eternity on the radio, until finally responding thus: I am neither an optimist nor a pessimist: Jesus Christ is risen from the dead.

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