"In the long run we are all dead" (Keynes): endurance and hope

All Saints' Day, 1 Nov 2026

Sermon at Churchill Chapel, Cambridge

by Nigel Cooper

Ps 71. 1-6

Isa 55. 10-13

Rom 5. 1-5

"Adults keep saying: 'We owe it to the young people to give them hope.' But I don't want your hope. I don't want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. And then I want you to act. I want you to act as you would in a crisis. I want you to act as if the house is on fire. Because it is." – Greta Thunberg *At the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland on January 25, 2019*[1].

Ten days ago the UN Environment Programme reported that it was now impossible to keep below 1.5 deg C without a significant overshoot[2].

It is in the context of climate change that I want to explore hope. There are plenty of other crises that we face, including personal and individual ones, to which hope might apply. Climate change, though, has more scientific investigation than others that I know of, so it makes a good test case.

May I remind you of my slogan, "Hope is a spiritual discipline, not an estimate of probabilities?" In St. Paul's phrase it is 'hope against hope'[3]; hope when hope is hopeless. Although the estimate of probabilities over global warming is, let's say, 'gloomy', there is a lot of expressed optimism around. People point to innovative technologies, increased uptake of renewable generation, and to surveys that evidence that a large proportion of people are concerned and want action to be taken[4]. We desire to be reassured and so we 'hope'. I have by no means conducted a professional literature review, but the text of this sermon, when it is posted on the chapel website, will have several links to papers, if you wish to consult them. What little of the research on hope and climate change I have read appears ambivalent and this seems to be around what type of hope, or fear or anger, the research has focussed on. It seems that a hopeful 'it will get sorted' hope,

1 18 Powerful Greta Thunberg Quotes to Inspire Climate Action | Earth.Org
2 https://www.unep.org/en/publications/report/emissions-gap-report-2026
3 Rom 4.18
4 Here are some random example webpages: Finding hope in climate action – UNDP Climate ; Five reasons for hope in the climate crisis | Oxfam | Oxfam ; Ten reasons to be hopeful about climate action

wishful thinking, tends to diminish climate action[5]. The converse is the case with what might be called robust hope: hope against hope. Keynes used his famous phrase, "In the long run we are all dead[6]" to spur immediate action.

Alongside what one paper called 'hopium' is the opposite self-protective emotion of hopelessness or numbness. It can masquarade as realism, being an adult-in-the-room, accepting the powers-that-be, but it is really a cop-out. There is worldly sense in putting one's head in the sand. "Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die,"[7] to use a maxim the Hebrew bible criticises. A more miserable version of this is, "I already have more problems and worries than I can cope with; I cannot take this one on also." I think that many students in particular feel that they cannot be 'merry' as just surviving is taking all their energy, so climate issues will just have to go on the back burner for now. Viewing the whole crisis is just too much, I agree. Maybe focussing on just bite-sized portions, individualised to specifics of what each one of us can do is the way to go.

Fear and anger are two other interesting emotional reactions. Greta Thunberg illustrates both of these. Both can be more effective than a vague hopefulness in leading to climate actions. Sticking with anger, there is some evidence in its beneficial effects in leading to climate change behaviours, especially if it is directed to humanity in general, i.e. a group of which one is a representative member, but not so much if the anger is directed at others, at 'they', e.g. politicians or companies[8]. However, it seems to me that anger, while an understandable emotional response, has a major downside. It adds to the anger swirling around our societies at the moment, provoking more anger in turn from those who feel threatened both by the challenge of climate change and by those demanding that they do something about it. It creates a backlash. This we see in right-wing groups that harvest anger against net zero policies to stimulate support. Climate has become their second-best recruiting sergeant after immigration and race. The institutions of the

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5 Is hope good for motivating collective action in the context of climate change? Differentiating hope's emotion- and problem-focused coping functions – ScienceDirect: "Hoping seems to serve an emotion-focused coping function in this context, which makes people feel better but does not solve the problem"; Frontiers | Hopium or empowering hope? A meta-analysis of hope and climate engagement: "messages suggesting societal efficacy (i.e., providing a sense of possibility that climate change could be addressed) did not significantly or substantially boost (nor discourage) engagement, and status quo-framed messages (i.e., messages highlighting that environmental conditions could stay the same if climate action is taken) had a marginally significant negative effect on engagement" ; Experiencing extreme weather and disasters is not enough to change views on climate action, study shows; Meta-analyses of the determinants and outcomes of belief in climate change | Nature Climate Change "climate change beliefs have only a small to moderate effect on the extent to which people are willing to act in climate-friendly ways."

6 A Tract on Monetary Reform (1923) Ch. 3, p. 80

7 Eccles 8.15; Isa 22.13

8 The strength and content of climate anger – ScienceDirect: "Among those reporting anger, directing it towards human qualities or actions was consistently and positively related to individual behavior, policy support, and activism while referring to responsible agents was not related to either."; Anger's Value in the Context of the Climate Movement, DOI: 10.59123/25a60x83: "climate anger offers several advantages: it can motivate people to join the climate movement, it has revolutionary potential to challenge the status quo, and it is well-suited to building community among activists."

state, feeling threatened, have ramped up law-and-order responses to demonstrations and protests, diminishing the freedoms of us all. My judgement, for what it's worth, is that the most angry of the climate protests went too far and brought unfortunate repercussions on us all.

Anger can also muddle thinking. In my last sermon I mentioned two books that, to my mind, took to heart the seriousness of the climate predicament. I added that I thought it no coincidence that it was a Christian book[9] that was able to look the truth in the face[10]. The other book, by Helm[11], is not religious. He too is realistic but he is also angry about the seriousness of our predicament. Unfortunately, though, I think a red mist makes much of his book repetitious and lacking in focus, full of spluttering.

For myself, I find anger helpful in waking me up, challenging my complacency. But then I need to move on from anger to more positive emotions. Anger doesn't have much hope. At least in the climate scene it is the emotion of those who feel they are on the loosing side.

So, back to hope.

A year ago I listened to a talk on what gave him hope by Fergal Keane. As a BBC foreign correspondent, and as a Northern Irishman, he has had first-hand experiences of social chaos and repression. What gave him hope in our present circumstances was not a series of victories, such as the ending of Apartheid in South Africa, which he covered. This may be because they have been replaced by new instances of the grip of evil in the affairs of nations. No, it was the heroism of individuals. Some names are well-known; Mandela. Others that he mentioned will remain unknown to the rest of us, but in their own settings they have challenged abusive power. Whether they succeeded in shifting things or not, their steadfast witness was that evil cannot conquer everyone. Their endurance is a testament to their hope.

This puts me in mind of the martyrs of the early church under the Roman empire. A martyr, may I remind you, originally was a witness and the word only later applied to those who lost their lives in their witness to the faith. I was talking to an ancient historian recently, who pointed out that the Romans did not know what to do with the Christians. The public at the games wanted spectacle, lions chasing screaming victims and such like, but the Christians just sat down and sang hymns. Their hope gave them the endurance that is so often encouraged in the letters of the New Testament. For this refusal to play the game of fear, and for other complex reasons, the Empire capitulated and adopted Christianity. Of course, it was not as straightforward as this. The deal with

9 Allwood and Davison, 2026, *Promise the Earth*, CUP
10 Though I think it too optimistic on the political front.
11 Helm, 2026, *Climate Realism*, CUP

the Empire, for instance, involved massive compromises on the part of the church. After Constantine, the church collaborated with the state to enforce its views on society, poacher turned gamekeeper. Even today around the world, far too much 'churchiantity' remains stuck in this Constantinian compromise, reducing hope to ameliorations within the constraints set by the state or even lending active support to the forces of control.

Conversely, the Church regularly rehearses the stories of the saints, both Jewish[12] and Christian[13], who for the hope set before them[14] were steadfast and endured all manner of persecutions down the centuries. This is particularly the case today, All Saints' Day.

This chapel has its own martyr, though not one who lost his life. I speak of our first chaplain, Noel Duckworth, whose plaque is on our north wall. A plaque to him in North Court terms him a war hero. At the fall of Singapore in 1942 Duckworth, then serving as an army chaplain, turned back to stay with the troops captured by the Japanese and he endured the prisoner of war camps that followed. He was beaten every day for refusing to worship the emperor; he inspired the spirits of his fellow prisoners. There is a remarkable prison sketch by Ronald Searle (of St Trinian's fame and an Anglia Ruskin alumnus) of Duckworth confronting a Japanese officer and giving him the hairdryer treatment. An inspiring example to us all. Do read his biography in the college library.

Back in February at Music and Words, those present will remember the powerful words of hope from Diana Shypovych. She is a Ukrainian student here and spoke of the twelve years since the first Russian attack and the four years since the full invasion. She spoke of the fatigue that has developed and how their allies' concern has become passive observation. She admitted that she began to wonder whether hope itself had run out. These are her own words:

"Then I had a conversation with one of my closest friends. She told me something difficult to accept: choosing hopelessness would be a selfish decision. Because hope - the ability to imagine a better future - carries responsibility. No one acts without hope. And by abandoning hope, we abandon the responsibility to act. That idea stayed with me. Hope is not merely an emotion. Hope is an obligation for us if we want our country to survive."

"Through [our] shared efforts, we discovered something essential: hope grows from action. Creating something gives you hope. Working alongside others gives you hope. Seeing minds change gives you hope."

12 A good example is Heb 11. 32-38
13 Such as those set out in the church's calendar
14 Heb 6. 18

"Indifference and excessive scepticism are not signs of realism. These are ways of avoiding responsibility. Hope is often dismissed as naïve. But in reality, hopelessness is far more dangerous. Hopelessness allows injustice to continue unchallenged. Hope, by contrast, demands effort."

She ended, "[Hope] is asking not simply [for] belief or optimism. But action. Because hope is not something we feel. It is something we choose and something we do. Do make your choice."[15]

Whether with or without a faith, these are people who have demonstrated a different type of hope, a hope of the spiritual discipline kind. Their sacrifices were and are not made according to the calculations of this world but made *sub specie aeternitatis,* in the light of eternity. Whatever the probabilities of worldly success, they kept faith with virtues such as truthfulness, justice and courage. These virtues share something of the nature of transcendence. They do not pass away.

St. Paul, in our reading, sets out some of the linkages here. Christians can embrace sufferings or trials, knowing trials stimulate endurance, which develops authentic character, and this leads to hope, even in the midst of the testing. This hope does not put the Christian to shame as they share as much in the love of God as they share in the sufferings of Christ. They share as much as in the glory of God as they share in the resurrection of the crucified Christ.

Rightly or wrongly, Christianity is inextricably an eschatological religion[16]. It looks to a transformed future, a feature it inherited from Judaism, evidenced in the anticipation of a renewed creation in the passage from Isaiah in our first reading, that even nature is restored such that the trees clap their hands with joy. It has a vision of the Kingdom of God which is of the world as it ought to be. And of a judgement that puts right all that has gone wrong. It builds on its Jewish roots with some added confidence because of the resurrection of Jesus (by the way, I think the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus is stronger than is commonly believed, but that is for another day). Thus, the Apostles' Creed, which we have just had in this service, asserts the Christian belief not merely that Christ rose from the dead, but that he will come to judge the living and the dead; it affirms the general resurrection of bodies, and the life everlasting. And the Lord's Prayer petitions for God's kingdom to come and God's will to be done on earth as in heaven. A kingdom of justice and peace; a world full of life, joy and love – and music!

Whether or not Christianity is right in its belief in the world to come, I feel it is surely right in pointing all of us to the importance of the self-giving virtues and of

15 From the speech of Diana Shypovych, President of the CU Ukrainian Society, at Music and Words on 2 Feb 2026
16 Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (ET: SCM Press; 1967)

commitment to the eternal verities. Hope does not lie in wishful thinking. It lies in a confidence, in a preparedness to endure, whatever our this-worldly prospects, for the sake of others and for the future – whatever that may hold.