The new Shofar

"Truly my soul finds rest in God; my salvation is from him. Truly he is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress; I will never be shaken – Psalm 62:1-2

EASTERTIDE 4

What is Hope?

When my oncologist informed me that I had "stage 4 bowel cancer" I must admit to just about falling off my chair. Until that moment, I had considered the tests I had undergone to be insignificant, the results an anomaly in the science. Given all the crazy and at times death-defying things I had done over my life, the number of times I almost made the Darwin awards, a little thing like cancer was not going to bring me down. That was, until the specialist uttered those two daunting words: "stage 4".

Of course, millions of people around the world are faced with this kind of mental trauma, and most of them far worse. These wonderful people still manage to take up the challenge to choose living rather than drifting into the darkness of "woe is me". I salute them and give thanks for the witness of their own courage and resilience. Not for them the self-indulgent path of euthanasia. They had been given life and with that life a vocation from God, and living or dying, those vocations remained their focus. From where comes their drive to live? May God bless them all.

And what a difference those people make to our understanding of the dignity of the human person. Men and women created in God's own image and likeness. They are God-bearers in the world, giving witness to all and sundry as to how we are important and valued until we draw our final breath. Young or old; in sickness or in robust good health; God seeks to use them, to use us, to use me to further the divine plan of revealing the Good News of the inauguration of the Reign of God (the Kingdom of God), upon the earth. Cancer or not, that is the one, unyielding, undefeatable reality over-riding everything else that comes our way. In all things God is. Encounter God = find life.

Hope being an anticipation of eternal life

I have been blessed in that my cancer is slow growing, able to be treated with daily chemo therapies. "Stage 4" means simply that this form of cancer cannot yet be stopped. I live with it. While I continue with those tablets, that little wretch inside of me does not grow and spread. It sits there, sucking away as a reminder that we are all weak and fragile creatures, alive one moment and the next reduced to a handful of dust.

What I do not do is not sit there ***wishing*** all of this would end – the treatment, the side-effects, the time spent in waiting rooms and treatment centres. As Christians we focus on ***Hope***. Hope is the confident expectation of, along with a longing for, the blessing of righteousness, that comforting reassurance that nothing can separate us from the love God has for us. It is the guarantee that in this life, as in the next, we live in God. The scriptures often speak of this Hope being an anticipation of eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ. Hope is the assurance that God will fulfill all of his promises.

This is ***the*** key point. Hope is a certainty, not based on us, but on God. Hope resides in a person, the Person of Jesus the Risen and Glorified Son of God. In all God is doing.

Hope has a certainty

The outcome of my Hope is already a reality, which is exactly the teaching of St Paul in **Romans 8:28**… *We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God: those who are called according to His purpose*. Our Hope is founded on the certainty that it is God Who fulfills His promises. He sent His Son to save us, and we know that God is not going to allow that divine act of love for us be wasted. He will fulfill His promise to save us and give eternal life to those who put their trust in Him. St. Paul exhorts us in his first letter to **Peter 1:3:** *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who in His great mercy gave us a new birth to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.* God's plans will not be thwarted by suffering or sin, by human limitations or wilful acts. Satan itself has no chance of robbing us of the great and wonderful gifts on offer to those who live in Christ. But we must dwell in Christ, imitating his way of living in the world with others and in the service of his Father.

Hope builds anticipation and involves patient waiting

Hope in Christ actively transforms the way we live in the world. When I sit in the outpatient's treatment room, I try to chat with those around me, both patients and their families as both share the struggles that can envelope their entire lives. Not surprisingly, there is often a gloomy feeling as people await the next report or prepare to hear the news 'there is nothing more we can do". I go there as a priest, my cross visible but also as a patient. We can all talk "cancer", treatment regimes, embarrassing side effects and sometimes end of life considerations. When asked about my own way of dealing with these things, I always speak of not having any major concerns with the present as the future is an absolute certainty. I quote **Benedict XV1**…*Only when the future is certain as a positive reality does it become possible to live the present as well*. My Hope rests not in medical advances or miraculous cures but in God. My Hope calls me to give witness to the future realities, future certainties, by the way I live now.

The world needs all that Christian Hope can offer

I do not presume to preach to people in those waiting rooms, but when talking about treatments and prognoses I do confess my faith and speak of the way divine Hope transforms and shapes the entirety of my life and my being. I try and give witness to the reality that this Hope *does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us* **Romans 5:3-5.** God's gift of Hope has not disappointed me. Importantly this applies to death and dying. And this is what most people want to hear, that *nothing can separate us from the love of God… neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons*…**Romans 8**:31-39.

Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth, that *what is seen is transitory, but what is unseen is eternal* (**2 Cor 4:18**). Without an intentional effort, what is transitory so easily bumps the eternal down a rung or two on our priority ladder. This season of Eastertide calls us to reaffirm what it is that gives our lives the certainty of Hope. Now is a good time for each of us to set down our own stories of a living Hope and how it transforms us.

For more on Hope check my web page – www.houghongod.com