

3 JUNE 2007 – TRINITY SUNDAY

Romans 5:1-5

Hope and despair. Few themes have elicited as much attention by artists. Does hope require despair for its existence? In the past, theologians have been quick to connect the two. ‘What oxygen is for the lungs, such is hope for the meaning of life’, wrote Emil Brunner.¹ Likewise, Martin Luther once wrote, ‘Everything that is done in the world is done by hope’.² Why else would Zacchaeus climb up the tree?

In the first verse of her 1891 poem, *Hope is the Thing with Feathers*, Emily Dickinson expresses this enduring deathlessness of hope:

‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul
And sings the tune without the words
And never stops at all.³

Of course, just three chapters on in Paul’s Roman epistle, the Apostle gives voice to the truth that hope is not only that which humanity knows, but indeed is that ‘eager longing’ which the Word of hope finds its groaning echo of in creation. So poet Jenn Habel asks,

I don’t know why another Monet tacked to some-
one’s wall makes me think
the world will go on. Why one stunted daffodil
outside a rental house and I’m
alive.⁴

Renowned novelist and Holocaust survivor, Elie Wiesel, once wrote: ‘I have learned two lessons in my life: first, there are no sufficient literary, psychological, or historical answers to human tragedy, only moral ones. Second, just as despair can come to one another only from other human beings, hope, too, can be given to one only by other human beings’.⁵ Ultimately, both the ‘moral’ answer and this ‘other’ human being is Jesus Christ, our hope. The truth is that no matter how rich the gifts of God in creation are, humanity cannot live without a sense and an experience of that which is above nature. That is why the Scriptures describe Christian hope not as mere desire but of real expectation which finds its *telos* in a person (a *telos* which is grounded in this person’s past action; see 4:25) who is the same yesterday, today and forever.

I am reminded of Picasso’s 1903 Blue Period painting *Tragedy*.⁶ This period (1901-1904) in Picasso’s life manifested itself in sympathy for social outcasts that was duly reflected in his work, both in subject matter (blind beggars and destitute families were common themes) and in his melancholy blue colour schemes. Reminiscent of the work of Doménicos Theotocópoulos (better known as El Greco) and Diego Rodríguez de Silva y Velázquez (better known as Diego Velázquez), *Tragedy* depicts three skeletal, barefoot, elongated and shabbily clothed figures (two adults and a boy) standing on the seashore as a humiliated trinity. Has someone died, or is about to? Have they lost their home? Imprisoned in their wretchedness, are these family members unavailable to one another? One does not have to think too hard to recall Picasso’s own dislocation and physical deprivation which he experienced as he struggled to establish himself as a young artist and penurious foreigner in Paris. Exemplifying the depths of the human condition, *Tragedy* conveys a sense of spiritual alienation in keeping with the intellectual discontent of his bohemian milieu, capturing the mood of melancholy and isolation. Yet, in this simulacrum of despair, there is also a seed of hope.⁷ While the two ‘grown ups’ stand with heads bowed looking defeated, the boy begins to look up. Simultaneously, he begins to push the older man away with his right hand, while turning his left palm upwards. Is this just youthful confidence or could it be that he has begun to grasp the truth that ‘suffering produces perseverance’ and that ‘hope does not disappoint us’? Is he reaching out

in solace, or looking for support? He would not be the first child, or the last, to ask in the midst of family crisis, 'Did I cause it? Will I die? Who will look after me?'. Could it be that he has come to know something that that Fourteenth Century Persian-born, and Sufi-inspired, poet Hafiz, who himself was described as physically not unlike the boy in Picasso's *Tragedy*, knew? In his poem, *The Day of Hope*, Hafiz writes:

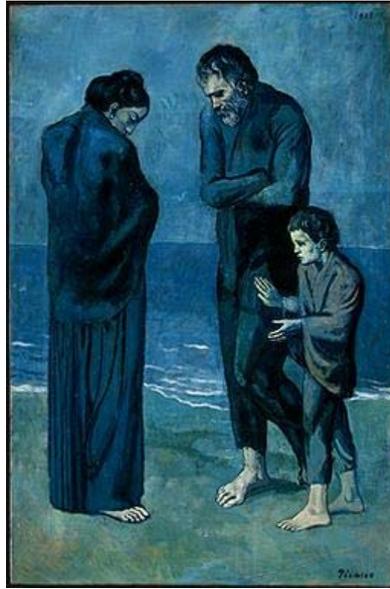
The days of absence and the bitter nights
Of separation, all are at an end!
Where is the influence of the star that blights
My hope? The omen answers: At an end!
Autumn's abundance, creeping Autumn's mirth,
Are ended and forgot when o'er the earth
The wind of Spring with soft warm feet doth wend.

The Day of Hope, hid beneath Sorrow's veil,
Has shown its face – ah, cry that all may hear:
Come forth! the powers of night no more prevail!
Praise be to God, now that the rose is near
With long-desired and flaming coronet,
The cruel stinging thorns all men forget,
The wind of Winter ends its proud career.⁸

It is hope, given to us by God, that enables us to endure. The hope of completion. The hope of the 'not yet' being the 'now'. The hope of the glory of God. For this, Jesus enters into the wilderness, into the god-forsakenness, bearing our shame, bearing the wrath of God, and brings humanity to the end that was always God's purpose for us—communion with him as children of the Father and servants of the King.

On this Trinity Sunday, we would do well to recall our great hope in Christ—his coming, and our participation in him in the divine perichoretic life. This is hope that strengthens us to live, for it is God's own hope as well, secured in the death and resurrection of the second person of the Trinity. Whilst Western Society is marked at every level with deep-seated despair, the goal of the entire people of God is God himself. It is a hope that involves the healing of the nations—warring will be no more—and its shalom dynamic encourages the daughters and sons of God to the very end. Life can only be fully lived in the knowledge that there is no (ultimate) death. Most of all it is 'the God of hope' who is revealed to us. It is his Son, our hope laid up in heaven, and his Spirit, the one who evokes hope by in-flooding the love of God, who sustains us in love, faith and hope.

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Pablo Picasso
The Tragedy, 1903
Oil on wood, 1053 cm x 690 cm
National Gallery of Art, Washington
Chester Dale Collection

¹ Emil Brunner, *Revelation and Reason* (trans. O. Wyon; Raleigh: Stevens Book Press, 1984), 9.

² Martin Luther, cited in Karl A. Menninger and Jeanetta L. Menninger, *Love Against Hate* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1942), 215.

³ Emily Dickinson, *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson, Volume 1* (ed. R. W. Franklin; Cambridge/London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981), 367-8.

⁴ Jen Habel, 'And Then, of Course, There's Hope', n.p. [cited 18 August 2006]. Online: http://www.fishhousepoems.org/archives/jenn_habel/and_then_of_course_theres_hope.shtml.

⁵ Cited in Jennifer York-Barr, et al., *Reflective Practice to Improve Schools: How to Energize Meetings and Manage Difficult Groups* (Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press, 2006), 113-4.

⁶ For analysis of this painting in an HIV/AIDS context see Sandra L. Bertman, 'Children and Death: Insights, Hindsight, and Illuminations' in *Children and Death* (eds. D. Papadatou & C. Papadatos; New York: Hemisphere, 1991), 311-329.

⁷ Recall the words of playwright Clare Booth Luce, 'There are no hopeless situations; there are only people who have grown hopeless about them'. Quoted in Robert J. Ackerman, *Perfect Daughters: Adult Daughters of Alcoholics* (Deerfield Beach: Health Communications, 2002), 132.

⁸ Hafiz, *The Garden of Heaven: Poems by Hafiz* (trans. G. Bell; Mineola: Dover, 1979), 54. Or consider the final stanza of Charlotte Brontë's poem, *Life*. Charlotte Brontë et al., *Poems* (Whitefish: Kessinger, 2004), 47. Also John Keats' poem, 'To Hope'. John Keats, *Selected Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 2-4.