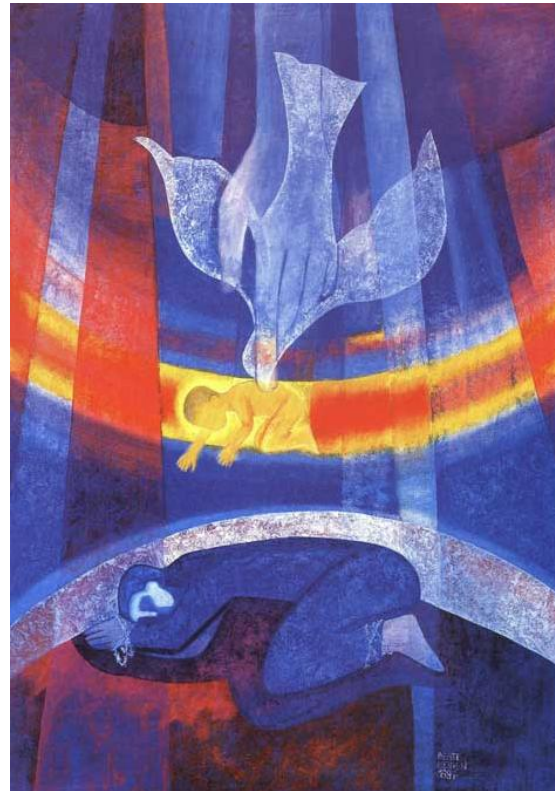


## A Reflection on Hope

*Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.*

Romans 5.1-8



The image by Beate Heinen, called 'Gabriel's Proclamation', depicts the hand of God directing the Holy Spirit while the Living Word, Jesus Christ, takes human form and comes among us, even into the most abject of experience (notice the barbed wire around his hands and feet). All of this allows us – as the Apostle Paul puts it – to 'obtain access to the grace' which comes from God and is our hope and salvation in him. Jesus lies prostrate on the ground: but *for us* this becomes the means of hope and of renewed joy – 'our hope of sharing the glory of God', even as Jesus Christ, too, returns into the Glory of God having humbled himself in human form in solidarity with us and on our behalf (cf Philippians 2.5-11).

This is why *hope* is one of the fundamental attributes of the Christian life. We have hope, even in the face of what might look sometimes to be hopeless, because God has interjected himself into the place of abjection so that even that place may be saved – and it and we are saved by the Presence of God with us: Emmanuel, *God-who-is-with-us* (Matthew 1.23). St John of the Cross, in a comment on the text of Lamentations 3.29,

speaks about the experience we may from time to time feel of being abject and weighed down upon, as if hope had eluded us. This is the time for us to put our face to the ground – much as Jesus does in the image – ‘that, by chance, there may come a present hope’ (*Dark Night* Book 2.8.1). That is to say, the real hope will emerge from what seems like the darkness; and it will come to us in so far as we share with Jesus Christ in his own self-emptying, that we may return *with him* into the vision of Glory.

Something like this is what the Apostle Paul also discovers *in the face of suffering*. Suffering in itself is not an experience from which God is absent; on the contrary it is a condition in which the Presence of God can become especially tangible and accessible to us. Suffering enhances our capacity to endure what is difficult; suffering and endurance make our character more resilient and strong; and in this renewal of moral and spiritual strength emerges the hope which sustains us before God.

All of this is a reflection on the Apostle’s *experience*. It is an experience which follows from the commitment to *faith* on which he had commented in the previous chapter of his Letter to the Romans – the sense of awe and wonder which had come to *Abraham* as he beheld the myriad stars of the sky and ‘trusted in God’ (Genesis 15.6; cf Romans 4.13-25). This trust, which becomes the basis also of the hope (and the Apostle Paul will then move on to reflect on the third and final virtue of *love*), is a *commitment of will* rather than ‘belief’ as such, especially if we limit our understanding of belief to a series of doctrines or theological theorems. Abraham did not need to *understand* all the details for his heart and his will to be ready to *trust in God*, and to trust in the *goodness* of God for him and all those who would succeed him – including you and me today.

The faith and the hope are authenticated by the work within us of the Holy Spirit – who ‘pours God’s love into our hearts’ – even while we are still ‘weak’ and ‘ungodly’. In our weakness – in the moment when we abandon self-dependence and self-glorification – Jesus comes to us and raises us up. It is not something which *we* do or earn or deserve or merit: *God* does this simply because he loves us.

This is the absolute core of the Apostle Paul’s faith and hope – and it is the basis on which he exhorts us, too, to know that we are held in God’s love in such a way that the vision of God’s Glory is reawakened within us. May it be so! Amen.