

Christian Hope



Can rainbows, even a thin one glimpsed at dawn against a pink sky, speak to us of a hope we can hold on to when gripped by despair?

In Genesis 9:13, God set a rainbow in the clouds as a sign of God's covenant with every living creature on earth. It was to remind God that a large flood will never again be allowed to destroy all flesh, human and non-human on the earth. The rainbow thus became a sign of hope for all creation from a faithful loving God.

Christian hope is based on the belief in a faithful and merciful God who created the universe out of love, and particularly values and loves every human being.

We come to a belief in such a God in several ways. It makes sense when we observe creation as something carefully and deliberately planned to

enable it to evolve. Also, by examining our own experiences, relationships and world events, we can discover they have meaning when studied along with words and events in the Bible—especially the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Christians believe in Jesus as an historic person who was born, lived in Palestine in the first century, and after death by crucifixion was raised to life by God. Jesus revealed God's love in his life, and promised to be with us and to give us his Spirit to guide us through our life.

Living as a Christian today is not always easy. We are called to proclaim the love and compassion of Jesus to others in our words and actions, working to make life here on earth a place where Jesus rules. Hope can often encourage and strengthen us when we are struggling with our faith in God, and feeling empty rather than loving.

In John Bunyan's book "Pilgrim's Progress", Christian first has a friend called Faithful to assist him on his journey. When Faithful is killed, Hopeful, who was also helped by Faithful, becomes Christian's companion. It is Hopeful who encourages Christian when they are prisoners in the dungeon of Giant Despair's Doubting Castle. Near the end of their journey, Christian and Hopeful arrive at the river of death which must be crossed. They step into the water. Christian fears and begins to sink. Hopeful feels ground under his feet. He holds Christian's head above the water, comforting him by talking about those in heaven ready to welcome them. But Christian replies, "'Tis you they wait for." Hopeful then speaks of Jesus who makes whole... Suddenly Christian cries out, "Oh, I see Him again!" The water becomes shallower, and both safely reach the other side.

We are all destined to die, but Christians believe, based on Jesus' resurrection, that we will pass through death to a new life. Accounts of Jesus' resurrection body indicate that this new life will be both connected with our life now, but also different. For example: Jesus' resurrection body could pass through locked doors; Mary knew Jesus only when he spoke her name; and the travellers to Emmaus failed to recognise Jesus until he joined them for a meal and blessed, broke, and

gave them bread.

After death, we shall still have links to our past life. The love, faith, healed wounds and joy we experienced survive, but we shall have a new body which will not die. This sounds great, but what about the judgement we read about, will God banish us to eternal punishment?

None of us are perfect. We can all, as I read recently, identify ourselves with both the sheep and the goats as imaged in Matthew 25:31-46. What about our unfinished business, people we have hurt and our fractured relationships? Also, what will happen to those who suffer from dementia or are haunted by terrifying memories? I do not know the answers, but I trust in a merciful and loving God who longs for us all to experience healing and redemption. I believe that such a God will help us, even after death, to receive forgiveness, forgive others and achieve a peace which was not possible for us in this life. I cannot accept that God wants anyone to be condemned for ever.

Christian hope, supported by the witness of an empty tomb and risen Jesus, is the expectation that a faithful loving God will not let death be the end for us. We shall be part of God's redeemed new creation begun with Jesus' resurrection (2 Corinthians 5:17). This life will not be boring, but a continual discovery of the wonders and joy of God's mysterious love in our relationships with and in Christ, and with others, human and non-human.

Even a 'thin' hope, like a thin rainbow stretched across the sky, is strong enough to hold us when we believe in a God who has a 'thick' love for us and delights in all creation - including animals!

To journey through life in hope gives meaning to our lives. Hope encourages us in difficult times with glimpses of a life to come, living together and individually in Christ, and in God's love for ever.

*Sr Dr Helen CSC
June 2018*