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6 REPORT

A Theology of Hope

Marking 80 years of Christian Aid

Nick Spencer and Bob Kikuyu

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Executive summary

- Hope can feel very distant right now, with war, civil conflict, mass displacement, climate chaos and democracies in retreat. A serious theology of hope cannot shy away from such hard realities and needs to acknowledge the pain and fear in the world today.
- That acknowledged, a careful study of the long-term global trends over the 80 years since Christian Aid was founded, does give reasons to be hopeful.
- We should be careful here, however. Investors are repeatedly told, 'Past performance is no guarantee of future results'. So it is with hope for the future. Are there deeper – theological rather than circumstantial – reasons to be hopeful?
- We believe there are.
  - First, we need to recognise that hope is not the same as optimism. We confuse the two at our cost.
  - Second, we should acknowledge that there are sometimes misguided theological reasons for hope. They help no one and can even be actively harmful.
- Having said that, there is a strong theology for hope, based on the biblical ideas concerning:

- the reliability of God and God's creation
- the reality of human agency
- the power of human creativity
- the significance of human trust – or 'faith'.

— Ultimately, hope is more than simply a feeling (our feelings are too unpredictable). Hope is a state of mind, of intention, of determination based on what God has revealed to us of himself in Jesus Christ and the scriptures that attest to him.

Photo credit: Sean Hawkey

Introduction

The symbolism of the UK government cutting its overseas aid budget to fund defence spending in February 2025 is hard to miss. It came hard on the heels of the Trump administration's near complete freeze on USAID spending. Other countries have followed suit. People will die as a result of this.

There are plenty of reasons, beyond the suffering that will come from the loss of overseas aid, to feel hopeless today. Israel's invasion of Gaza in response to the horrific 7 October 2023 Hamas attack has led to over 50,000 Palestinian lives lost and an unravelling humanitarian crisis. Ukraine limps through its fourth year of war fearing its efforts to defend itself may have been in vain. It is difficult to know how many people have been killed in the Sudanese Civil War, or in the Democratic Republic of Congo, but the number undoubtedly runs into the tens of thousands. Evidence of torture and mass graves has been discovered outside Khartoum, while Reuters describes Congo as 'a tinderbox conflict… ready to explode.' And then there is the climate crisis, already a slow-moving disaster, now made all the more potent by President Trump's promise to 'drill, baby, drill', and the wider political 'cooling' (so to speak) over its imminence and severity.

Given all this, it's no surprise we may be tempted to feel hopeless. The details are difficult to confront but it is important not to avoid them, because if hope is to be meaningful, it cannot be naïve. Hope cannot be purchased at the cost of ignorance, nor faith at the cost of gullibility. If we are to find hope, we must find it with our eyes open.

It is precisely when a situation looks bleakest and most hopeless, however, that we most need to find hope. Hope on a sunny day by

the beach, when all is well, is redundant. It is when the storm clouds are gathering or, worse, when the storm is breaking, that we *need* hope.

But needing hope means needing *reasons* – good, cogent, realistic reasons – for hope. Hope without reason amounts to little more than crossed fingers and wishing in the dark.

Such reasons can come in different forms. It is a foundational Christian belief that the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ, and testified about in the Bible, offers good, cogent and realistic grounds for hope. It is not a cheap hope, as anyone even vaguely familiar with the narrative of the gospels will know. It is not a straightforward hope – all too often we misinterpret Christian hope as the belief that God will sort everything out. And it is not an easy hope – it demands a great deal of people.

But it is a true hope, deep in its roots, unflinching about the challenges, and realistic about what it asks of us fallible humans. There is no definitive, authoritative or final theology of hope. There is never any final word in theology. 'Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.' (John 21:25)

This short essay, accompanied by personal stories, unpacks a Christian theology of hope, and offers it to a world that needs it right now.

Hope in Feasting on Scarcity!

Christian Aid since its inception has been a beacon of hope for people living in poverty and in vulnerable situations around the world. After 80 years, the challenges have not dwindled but increased exponentially. The current ecological and climate crisis; global pandemics, wars and threats of nuclear war; and the impacts of a second Trump term on international aid, trade, economy and health are turning our world into a 'sinking ship.' In the metaphor of a sinking ship the rich and powerful gamble with the fate of poor people in luxury on the deck. Meanwhile we in the economic South are drowning – keeping the ship afloat, struggling to keep our heads above water – trapped within the hull and condemned to perish.

Hope in Oceania is expressed in my Raga context in Vanuatu as 'Journeying into the future looking into the past.' It is about journeying as a community and people of faith glancing back into history to seek wisdom from our ancestors to help navigate the complex challenges of the present, that provide footholds for future pathways. It is a spiritual and contemplative process which allows for restraint in decision making, pausing to create space to reimagine and resituate us and our place in the world before making decisions that will provide solutions now and steer us towards the alternative pathways that are open in the future.

In a world driven by labour-intensive production, the marketplace and its trade, consumerism, individualism, private

ownership, profit and general hunger for more – and more – hope is embodied in the story of a sacred feast in which a hundred people shared a small passerine bird or *lagalaga* in my Hano language.

The story births opportunity for us to unlearn and detach ourselves from the economic doctrine of scarcity: 'because of limited availability of resources, its perceived value and desirability is increased leading to higher demand.' This creates a false scarcity driven by profit with a bottomless hunger for more and more without satisfaction.

The story suggests an alternative narrative with a vision of hope based on the principle of 'Feasting on Scarcity:' a scarcity where small is defined as 'big,' 'more,' 'enough' and 'sufficient.' It is beautiful in how we can reimagine and rebuild our societies to usher in a new economy informed by equitable sharing according to needs instead of the hunger for more and more. It is radical and powerful in its potential to transform our hearts to put our faith into action in offering ourselves like the little *lagalaga*, to salvage our mother earth from sinking and to liberate the rich to redistribute the worlds wealth for poor people in the hull to share the deck with dignity and integrity as equals in the image of God.

Winston Tarere is a Pacific Island Theologian and Church Minister

1 Inadequate reasons for hope

Humans are not particularly good at judging risk. We think flying is more dangerous than driving and vastly overestimate the likeliness of dying through terrorist-related activities.

The reason for this is that we judge risk according to its 'availability' – how readily we can recall it – and not by its prevalence or significance. Air disasters and terrorist attacks are rare but widely reported. We recall them easily and so overestimate their prevalence and exaggerate their risk.

The same logic applies to how we think about the world in general, not just moments of crisis. Because news is pervasive and usually bad, we tend to view the world more negatively than it really is. This does not undermine or undervalue the kinds of tragedy that we do see on the news. Every single civilian death in a warzone or premature death from disease or malnutrition is a tragedy of enormous proportions.

But the widespread reporting of such tragedies and the readiness with which we retrieve them from our memories and use them to construct a narrative of the world, can deafen us to the news and trends in the world that are no less real but much more encouraging.

Photo credit: Dominique Fofanah

We can see this clearly when we look at some of the changes in the world since Christian Aid was founded 80 years ago. To take one example, concerning one of the most dreadful events in human life: the global child mortality rate (i.e. the percentage of children who die before reaching the age of five) stood between 30 and 40% in the late 1940s. Today, it is just 3.7%.

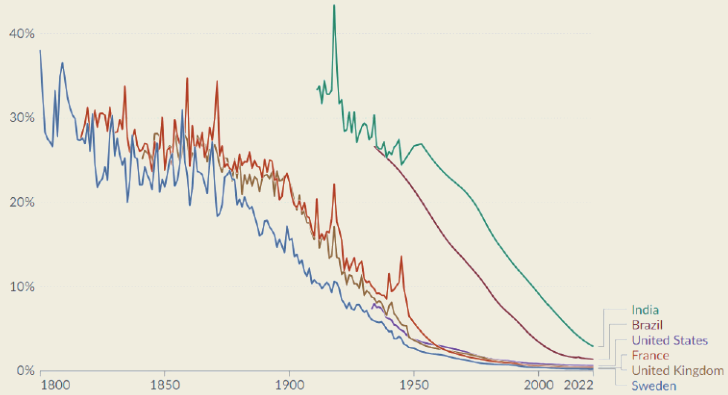

Figure 1: Child mortality rate, 1751 to 2023: Estimated share of newborns who die before reaching the age of five.
Source: Our World in Data; data source: Gapminder (2015); UN Inter-agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation (2025)

In a similar vein, in 1950, the average life expectancy worldwide was 46.4 years; today, it is over 73. Deaths from tuberculosis, polio, malaria, influenza and both indoor and outdoor air pollution have all fallen over this period, as have deaths from natural hazards. Famine has become less common and less deadly.

Over the same time, the proportion of people living in extreme poverty has fallen from over 50% in 1950 to below 10% today, while global standards of education have risen.

1.1. Inadequate 'secular' reasons for hope

Data trends of this nature require careful handling, however. Put another way, just because things have been improving in the (recent) past, there is no guarantee they will continue to do so in the immediate, let alone long-term, future. As investors are repeatedly told, 'past performance is no guarantee of future results'.

This is most obviously the case with regard to climate change and environmental degradation. As many people point out, however 'dematerialised' high-income countries believe themselves to be – with trade increasingly service-based, and human interaction and consumption habits shifting online – all human activity is ultimately material, because we are material beings. An awful lot of 'dematerialised' economic activity relies on some very 'material' rare earth metals!

Environmental degradation is serious precisely because it is the ground beneath all our progress, and abusing or harming that ground threatens to bring the entire superstructure of human progress crashing down. You do not have to believe in the most apocalyptic scenarios facing us through climate change to recognise that the divergence between improving human conditions and deteriorating environmental conditions over recent decades cannot continue indefinitely.

Photo credit: Sean Hawkey

More generally, there is a danger that recent decades of progress generate a kind of historical amnesia and with it the conviction that this kind of progress is natural. This attitude ends up confusing hope with optimism. This distinction is often remarked on, not least by former Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, who observed that 'optimism is the belief that the world is changing for the better; [whereas] hope is the belief that, together, we can make the world better.' Optimism is the belief that the (recent) trend lines will continue heading in the right direction. Hope is the belief that they can.

There are motifs within the scriptures that warn us against this kind of optimism, especially when it takes technological or political forms. The most obvious is the story of the Tower of Babel in the book of Genesis. There are many different ways of reading this tale – it is a story about language, about technology, about empire, about human hubris. But whichever (combination) you prefer, one of the key messages is surely that human progress is not inevitable. Our successes are always fragile, and however many reasons we may have for being hopeful, they do not add up to straightforward optimism, if only because human beings – in all our fragile, fallible, fallen glory – are an integral part of the future.

The belief that things will get better because things have got better is a poor reason for hope. At best it generates a kind of shallow optimism, impressive at first sight but without any deep roots. When the climate changes and the sun starts scorching and the waves start rising, this kind of optimism withers because it has no root and crumbles because it has no foundation.

1.2. Inadequate 'theological' reasons for hope

Secular reasoning has no monopoly on inadequate reasons for hope, however. There are weak theological reasons too.

Christian believers can fall into these all the time. Sometimes, we do so for the best of reasons. We find ourselves in a sensitive personal and pastoral encounter, speaking to someone who has suffered. And we reach for the right thing to say. 'God will answer your prayers', we say. 'God is in control,' we say. 'It's all in God's hands', we say.

The sentiment is often meant well. It is intended to encourage, to reassure, to uplift. It can sometimes even be proof texted by superficial reference to the scriptures. And sometimes, it even works. The person we are trying to comfort may feel comforted.

And yet the truth is, however well-meaning such attempts at comfort are, as reasons for hope they are ultimately neither deep nor satisfying. They can often feel like cheap reassurance and, whatever else, they do not work when scaled up to the level of a whole society, let alone a planet. 'Do not worry' or 'Let go and let God' is no answer to the climate crisis or civil war.

Jesus instructed his disciplines in the Sermon on the Mount not to be anxious. 'Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear', he told them. 'Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own,' he concluded. It is typically powerful, typically challenging teaching.

But it is also misleading if taken out of context. Because just before he tells his flock that tomorrow will worry about itself, he instructs them that 'the pagans run after all these things'. This is not to be their way. 'Your heavenly Father knows that you need them,' he reassures them. God's creation is one of abundance, not scarcity. And that being so, rather than running after them and constantly worrying about them, Jesus' followers should 'seek first [God's] kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.' This is about having the right priorities, the right desires. Because if they get their priorities well ordered, all these things – what they eat, what they drink, what they wear – will follow.

Here we have an intimation of the deep reasons for hope. It has something to do with the nature of God, with the abundance of God's creation, with the proper ordering of human desires and ambitions. This is where we should look for hope.

Ultimately, if we want to find good reasons for hope, not only must they be realistic – alert to the calamitous suffering that still haunts the world – but they must also be deep, going beyond simple data trend lines or religious platitudes, and heading for the heart of our understanding of God and God's creation.

Photo credit: Majdi Fathi/Christian Aid

2 Reasons to be hopeful

Shawshank, Zihuatanejo and the Hope Between

The 1994 film The Shawshank Redemption tells the story of Andy Dufresne, a man wrongfully imprisoned, whose quiet determination and resilience in the face of an unjust system make him a powerful symbol of hope. Throughout his 20 years in Shawshank Prison, Andy refuses to let the brutal prison system crush his spirit. Instead, he brings innovation and life to the desolate environment by building a library and teaching illiterate inmates to read, instilling a sense of dignity and purpose in a place designed to destroy both. The film's climax occurs after Andy leaves Shawshank and exposes the corruption that had been festering within it. He escapes to Zihuatanejo, a place he describes as free from the memories of the past, symbolising ultimate freedom and redemption.

As a woman raised in a South African township, this story resonates deeply. South Africa still embodies a system of 'separate development.' While the law theoretically allows access to all areas – whether the wealthy territories of Sandton or the historically disadvantaged townships like Soshanguve or Tembisa – the reality is starkly different. These townships were originally built by employers as captive labour camps to make it easy for workers to access industrial areas. They continue to be places of limited opportunity and harsh living conditions. They are South Africa's own Shawshank, prisons of poverty and institutionalised injustice where many people are trapped.

Yet, even in these dire circumstances, there are 'Andys', people who – despite the overwhelming odds – cling to hope. Hope that there is something beyond their current suffering, that they too can escape, and find their own 'Zihuatanejo.' Hope, like Andy's, fuels dreams of transformation, of liberation from the chains of systemic separate development.

For Christians, hope is central to faith. It is the hope that Christ will be their Saviour, both in the life after death and in the life before it. Hope is the belief that things will not always be as they are, that the suffering of today will not define the future. It is the hope that Christ will lead them out of their Shawshank, guiding them toward their own place of freedom, their Zihuatanejo.

Hope, in its truest sense, gives us confidence. It is the belief that something better is possible; that, like Andy, we too can transform the world around us, and in doing so, find a way out of despair and toward a brighter tomorrow. In a world still burdened by inequality, injustice and suffering, we are called to be people of hope. To believe that through Christ, we can transcend the harshest of circumstances and build a life worth living before and after death.

Sagoema Maredi from South Africa is a seasoned higher education practitioner, critical thinker and writer with a deep theological acumen. Most of her career has been in theological education

Why, then, should we hope? What are the deep biblical and theological reasons for us to face the future with hope? We believe that such reasons exist and in this section we set out four, which cumulatively allow us to construct a robust theology of hope.

2.1. God is reliable and God's creation is stable and lawful

One of the repeated themes within the scriptures is that creation is lawful and obedient to its Creator.

This is rooted in Godself. God's constancy is a theme that runs through the scriptures. 'God is not human... that he should change his mind', claims Numbers 23:19. 'I, the Lord, do not change,' affirms God through the prophet Malachi. (Malachi 3:6) This does not mean that the human understanding of God remains constant. Quite apart from the fact that humans are eminently capable of misunderstanding God and remaking him in our own image, it is a foundational claim of Christianity that our knowledge of God's being and character comes into incomparably sharp focus in the life and death of Jesus Christ. It is through him that God is most fully revealed. But this is not a radical change in the course of the Hebrew scriptures (in spite of some early Christian attempts to claim otherwise); nor does it change the idea of God's reliability so much as affirm it. 'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever', says the writer of the letter to the Hebrews. (Hebrews 1:8)

One way in which God's reliability is manifested is in the image of God as a lawgiver. This is most clearly the case with the law given

to the people of Israel. 'Now, Israel, hear the decrees and laws I am about to teach you,' God tells his people in Deuteronomy 4:1. 'Follow them so that you may live and may go in and take possession of the land the Lord, the God of your ancestors, is giving you.' The Psalmist sings praise, proclaiming 'Your righteousness is everlasting/ and your law is true.' (Psalm 119:142) These laws are given and studied and (hopefully) obeyed so that the people will live.

But the creation itself is also given a law to follow. '[The Lord] set the earth on its foundations,' sings the Psalmist in Psalm 104, 'it can never be moved.' 'By wisdom the Lord laid the earth's foundations,' writes the book of Proverbs (3:19), 'by understanding he set the heavens in place'. The much-interpreted creation narrative in Genesis 1 shows a pattern of ordered (and good) creation, rather than merely chaos tamed. 'The works of his hands are faithful and just;/ all his precepts are trustworthy,' says Psalm 111:7.

This lawfulness of creation has been an important theme in Christian thought throughout the centuries. Indeed, the idea that God was a lawgiver helped generate the idea that creation itself was law-governed, which turned into one of the key justifications for science. It is for good theological reasons that we talk about the 'laws of nature'.

The lawfulness of creation plays a significant role in a theology of hope. Indeed, it is the foundation of hope, because without it there is no hope. The reason for this is that unpredictability kills hope.

Experiments (conducted when ethical standards were somewhat more lax!) have shown that when animals are placed in

Photo credit: Majdi Fathi/Christian Aid

environments that are fundamentally volatile and unpredictable, they lose the ability to act. An animal that was predictably rewarded for an action, for example with food, thrived. One that was predictably punished, such as with a mild electric shock, suffered – but also learned to cope because they knew what to avoid doing. But those that were unable to tell whether the same action would be rewarded or punished, suffered terribly, showing severe stress-related symptoms and even curling up in paralysis.

This is a sobering lesson, which affects all creatures, not least humans. It is why, for example, children brought up in 'unstable' or 'chaotic' families struggle so hard to cope with life. If you cannot predict with some measure of accuracy what will happen tomorrow, or even how your actions will affect your immediate circumstances, you lose the incentive, even the ability, to act in the present and plan for the future.

This is why stable institutions are so important for social and economic development, as demonstrated by the 2024 Nobel-winning economists Daron Acemoglu, Simon Johnson and James Robinson. Their work has shown how (what they call) 'inclusive institutions' – such as the rule of law, property rights and political representation – give a society the stability, predictability and reliability necessary for people to settle, build, invest and share. Unstable and volatile regimes make development almost impossible. Without lawfulness – whether that is natural, personal, political or institutional – there is no development and there can be no hope. This is why hope must begin with the lawful, trustworthy and true foundations that the scriptures declare are the work of God's hands.

2.2. Human agency is real and important

It is fashionable today in some quarters to claim that human beings are 'merely [X]', with X being anything from 'animals' or 'evolved primates' to 'subconscious desires', 'genes' or 'information'. Every new advance in science tempts such sweeping generalisations. 'You, your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more', wrote Francis Crick, who co-discovered the structure of DNA, 'than the behaviour of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules.'[1]

It is perfectly true that humans can sometimes be helpfully understood in these ways. Human beings are evolved primates, genes, etc. But to claim that these understandings exhaust what it means to be human, and that we are 'merely' animals or genes etc. is to do us a disservice, usually by denying us any serious agency – the capacity to change things according to our discernment and will.

This is certainly not the picture of the human person visible from Christian theology. While it is wrong to claim that humans are valuable because they have agency and choice – they are valuable because they are loved by God not because of their particular capacities – it is nonetheless also true that, according to both scripture and theology, the human person does have effective agency. We are genes and animals but that does not stop us from being thinkers and doers.

We see this most clearly in Genesis 1, to which we shall turn in the following section, but the same sentiment is evident throughout the biblical narrative. Humans are called to hear, to discern and

Photo credit: David Macharia/Christian Aid

to choose wisely. 'This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses', Moses tells his people. 'Now choose life, so that you and your children may live.' (Deuteronomy 30:19) Reality is not simply forced on us. We face choices. Jesus says to his disciples in Matthew 16:24, 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me'. 'Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action,' says the letter of James, 'is dead'.

Humans are called to choose, to follow, to act, to exercise agency. We see the need for this clearly in everyday life. Denying people the capacity to shape their own future not only denies them that future, but also undermines their sense of self and hope. It is when people are able to determine the course of their life in some way, that they find their dignity restored and their hope rebuilt.

As already noted, there are plenty of ideologies around today that minimise that capacity for agency, and which view humans merely as indeterminate and indistinguishable particles of wider genetic, biological, psychological, social, economic and political forces. That is not the picture of humans we get from the Christian worldview.

To be clear, it is possible from the opposite extreme to see humans as pure, unattached and unencumbered expressions of will to power, unaffected by wider forces across society – but this is not a picture endorsed by biblical theology. Humans are challenged to choose, to follow, to act, to change – and in consequence we can (and have) improved our condition and that of the planet. This is a second foundation for hope. Sagoema Maredi from South Africa reflects on this in her story.

2.3. Humans are creative, innovative and industrious

Not only are humans 'agential', in the sense of being able to effect meaningful change, but we are also – or at least can be – creative, industrious and innovative. This is most clearly drawn in the creation stories of Genesis 1–2. 'So God created mankind in his own image,' we read in Genesis 1:27, 'in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.'

The phrase 'image of God' has probably attracted more commentary than any other in Christian history and can (and has!) been interpreted in innumerable ways. One of these is the image of an industrious and creative God, the phrase coming after 26 verses in which God brings all of creation into being and order. In the words of Pope John Paul II:

'this description of creation... is also in a sense the first 'gospel of work'. For it shows what the dignity of work consists of: it teaches that man ought to imitate God, his Creator, in working, because man alone has the unique characteristic of likeness to God. Man ought to imitate God both in working and also in resting, since God himself wished to present his own creative activity under the form of work and rest.'[2]

The message continues in the following verse when God blesses 'mankind' and says to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it,' (Genesis 1:28). It can also be seen, in a different way, in the following chapter when God tasks Adam with the job of naming the animals: 'He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name'. (Genesis 2:19)

These verses underline the human role in creation. Not only are we capable of exercising agency but our role is one of understanding – naming and categorising – the creation we have been placed in; of filling and replenishing it; of tending to and 'ruling' it (not in an exploitative sense but in the sense of the ideal biblical king – wise, caring, protective). Humans are there, in effect, as God's gardeners – 'working' the creation in such a way as will bring out its deep, abundant potential.

Unusually in the cultural world in which the early church developed, Christians placed a serious emphasis on work, not disparaging manual labour as being beneath human dignity but recognising and respecting its significance and worth. 'Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters,' wrote St Paul, who famously supported his ministry through working as a tentmaker. (Colossians 3:23)

This emphasis has made a profound difference through the ages, in the classical world right up to the modern period, in which, as just noted, Pope John Paul II underlined the importance of creative work to the human good. 'Even when it is accompanied by toil and effort,' he wrote in his encyclical *Laborem Exercens*, 'work is still something good, and so man develops through love for work.' (#11)

This offers us a third building block for our theology of hope. All too often, accompanying the idea that humans are merely passive receptacles, we encounter ideas – or more accurately feelings – that insist a problem is too difficult or simply too big for us. But Christian scriptures and theology encourage us to hold to the faith that the sheer creative and industrious fruitfulness of the human cannot be plumbed.

To be clear, it is easy (and wrong) for this to tip over into forms of techno-utopianism, the belief that every problem has a technical solution. This kind of 'Silicon Valley' mentality is not something that Christian theology endorses, primarily because this approach cuts God (and even the human) out of the equation, as well as failing to acknowledge the reality of human fallibility and sin (see next section).

One of the most inspiring visions of the future found in the scriptures, in the later chapters of Isaiah, talks of 'rivers flow[ing] on barren heights,/ and springs within the valleys... the desert into pools of water,/ and the parched ground into springs'. But this is a vision of what God promises to restore, not something that humans can construct alone, through their singular efforts or technology.

To be clear, this is a task and a journey that we are called to join, working for and with God in the restoration and renewal of creation. It is a task for which, Christian theology insists, humans have an important role, through our innate and inexhaustible capacity for creativity and work that is part of bearing the image of God. It is an essential element in building up a realistic hope for the future. But it is not a task we are instructed to pursue alone, nor a future we are required to build by ourselves.

2.4. Humans are communicative, cooperative, trusting... or we can be

The final theological reason for hope is perhaps the most important but also the most challenging.

> **The poor and needy search for water,**
> **but there is none;**
> **their tongues are parched with thirst.**
> **But I the Lord will answer them;**
> **I, the God of Israel, will not forsake them…**
> **I will make rivers flow on barren heights,**
> **and springs within the valleys…**
> **so that people may see and know,**
> **may consider and understand,**
> **that the hand of the Lord has done this,**
> **that the Holy One of Israel has created it.**
>
> **Isaiah 41:17–20**

Human beings are not faster, stronger, bigger, or fiercer that every other creature on earth. There is little reason, at least in raw physical terms, why we should be in any position of authority over the rest of creation. As the Psalmist asks, 'What is mankind that you are mindful of them,/ human beings that you care for them?' (Psalm 8:4)

The reason why we occupy that position is that we have a secret superpower: communication. This touches on another dimension of the imago Dei in Genesis 1. Humans are made in the image of God who has just spoken creation into being. There were plenty of creation stories in the Ancient Near East, and plenty of gods who created, but they tended to do so by violently battling the forces of chaos. The calm, ordered speech of the God in Genesis 1 is clearly making a point. In their own way, humans imitate this, creating new worlds of imagination and meaning through our communication with one another.

Humans are uniquely word-based creatures, and the extent and nature of our communication facilitates not only imagination and meaning but also a level of cooperation that has helped us 'conquer the world'. We live in a reliable creation. We have agency to change things. We are capable of remarkable industry and creativity. But it

Photo credit: Christian Aid/ W Nungu

is our ability to work and create *together* that truly elevates us, and lies at the heart of our ability to transform the world for the better. Cooperation and hope are closely linked.

Our communication and cooperation are a challenge too, however. Because if we can communicate, we can also lie; if we can cooperate, we can also segregate; if we can work together, we can also work for our narrow self-interest. The cooperation facilitated by our unique capacity for communication is a superpower, but, like all superpowers, it can be abused.

There is good reason, then, why the New Testament says as much as it does about the need for peace, unity, harmony and communion. 'Live in harmony with one another,' Paul instructs the Christians in Rome (Romans 12:16). The Christian life is (intended to be) one of cooperative harmony. 'From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.' (Ephesians 4:16) It is by love that these bonds are sustained and repaired. 'I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.' (John 17:26) The reason for this constant emphasis in the scriptures is precisely because we humans do fail, repeatedly and sometimes egregiously, to live up to the standards of communication and cooperation that we should achieve.

When you turn from Greek philosophy to the Hebrew Bible, you find yourself in a darker world, one that grapples painfully and honestly with the reality of human sin, suffering and the presence of evil. The novelist Marilynne Robinson makes this point at the start of her book *Reading Genesis*, which opens by saying that 'the Bible is

a theodicy, a meditation on the problem of evil'. The theme carries on into the New Testament, reaching its climax in the death of Jesus Christ. There is no turning away from humans' failure to cooperate and love. On the contrary, the cross of Christ is an embrace of that failure in its most wicked form, punishing the innocent one for the sake of the guilty many. For all the Bible's confidence in the enormous human capacity for positive communication, cooperation, trust and harmony, it is also anything but naïve about it. On the contrary, Christianity stares the darkness of the human condition in the face.

It is precisely because we place the self above the other, sometimes even seeking to destroy the other for the sake of the self, that the world spirals into destructive chaos and we lose hope. However, in contrast to the promises of God's faithfulness and the trustworthiness of creation, there are no guarantees about human faithfulness and trustworthiness.

Communication and cooperation constitute our fourth foundation for hope. We are assured (and we often see) that humans are capable of great acts of kindness and generosity, of love and forgiveness – precisely the virtues we need to transform the world for the better. And this is a legitimate reason to be hopeful for the future. But it comes with a strong health warning. Such communication and cooperation does not always come easily or naturally, and when we fail, the hope that rests on this foundation can all too easily fail too. We have a treasure, but it is in a jar of clay.

The Birth of Hope

It was the time of *Bardunii*, the season of medicinal plants in my community. It was during that sacred time that I was born. My grandmothers and grandfathers, together with my parents, took my placenta and umbilical cord, and with them planted two seeds: one of cacao and one of coconut. As their hands opened the earth, my great-grandfather, along with my mother and father, lifted their voices in a sung prayer.

In that simple and profound act, they planted more than seeds. They planted memory, connection, belonging. They planted the certainty that all relationships matter: with life, with the land, with water, with the trees, with the ancestors, with those who came before and those yet to come. That planting was a gesture of gratitude to the Creator for the gift of life, a deep thanksgiving to *Nabgwana*, Mother Earth, for her generous nourishment. It was also a way to honour our *Gunadule* ancestors.

My grandmothers, wise in song and spirit, sang: 'When those trees grow, she will remember that she is the sister of the cacao and of the coconut palm. And so, she will never forget that she is connected to all forms of life, that everything is interwoven in the same fabric of love and respect.'

Hope blossoms with the birth of a child and the planting of a tree. Their growth testifies to the goodness of the Creator, the boundless generosity of the Earth, the echo of ancient voices,

and the call to care for our relationships with all living beings. In this ceremony, various threads intertwine to sustain hope as a living tapestry:

— Generational continuity, which prepares each new life to walk with an ethic of care, knowing their existence is woven with the land, not separate from it.

— Spirituality as the root of community: when the song of the great-grandfather, the elders and the midwives becomes embodied hope – living words that give strength, prayers that are inherited like sacred seeds.

— Reciprocity with the Earth, because to plant with love and with one's own body is to remember that we are not here to take, but to give back, to express gratitude, to care.

— The body as a territory of life, where the placenta and umbilical cord are not discarded, but returned to the earth as an offering. In this way, the body also becomes root, and the earth, a body that nourishes.

Today within systems that produce death, indigenous communities continue to be living signs of hope. Our very existence is resistance, but it is also an alternative.

And our voices, in national and international spaces, at summits like the COPs and in other advocacy platforms, are seeds that refuse to die. Each word spoken is like a danced prayer, a song that dreams of forests, of fruit, of shade for all

peoples of the world. And in that dream prophecy also lives, like the prophet Joel reminding us that in the last days, the Spirit will be poured out on all flesh – not only human, but all life: animals, trees, mountains, rivers. We are all bound to the Spirit of Life, like a baby to the umbilical cord, a sign that hope is not only for us, but for the resurrection of the entire Earth.

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6

Conclusion

Christianity is a religion of hope, but not cheap hope. It does not fall for the idea that just because things have improved, they will improve. It does not hold to the belief that humans are merely passive players, the playthings of the gods, the stars or their genes. It does not believe that we run on iron rails of determinism, or that the future is destined to be just another version of the past. And it refuses to believe that sin and failure are the end of the story.

Rather, the biblical story, and theological reflection on it, offers us a realistic and resilient – if painfully honest and much bruised – vision of hope. It insists that

1. Creation is law-governed, stable and largely predictable. We can face the future with a measure of confidence about how our actions will affect the world around us. We can afford to plan, even if that also means developing contingency plans. While creation is open to newness and change, it is essentially true and trustworthy.

2. Humans are gifted with sufficient agency. We can reflect, think, choose and act. We are not just controlled by forces outside our power. We can make a difference. That does not mean every problem is fixable, or that technology is the key to every lock. But it does mean that we should be confident in our ability to shape the future.

3. Humans have the natural capacity for industry and creativity. Not only should we be confident in our agency, but also in our ability to work and be creative. Christianity emphasises the importance

and goodness of work, and insists that by means of such committed industry, we can fulfil God's creation mandate for us.

4. Humans are communicative and highly cooperative... or we can be! Our ability to communicate lies at the heart of our ability to transform God's world, but also at the heart of our failures to do so. Our ability to communicate and cooperate is our human superpower, but it does not necessarily come easily to us.

These four reasons do not add up to optimism, the belief that the world simply is changing for the better. But they do collectively amount to a foundation for hope – that we can forge a better future – which is what we need right now.

These are, as we set out at the start of this essay, difficult times. That recognised, humanity has lived and navigated through troubled times before. Christian Aid was originally called Christian Reconstruction in Europe, and was set up with a mission to provide relief and support to refugees and communities devastated by the Second World War.

It is hard to imagine a more inauspicious start than this, in the rubble of a war that had murdered tens of millions of people, and at a time when millions more people were displaced, hungry, bereaved and broken.

But from that rubble a more hopeful and peaceful world was slowly built. Events over the ensuing 80 years, not least those today, serve as a constant reminder that such hope and peace can never be taken for granted. Repeat: hope is not the same as optimism. But trusting in the reliability of God's creation; in the gift of genuine

and effective human agency; in the commands and resources for creativity and industry; and in our ability to communicate and cooperate together, we can face the next 80 years with hope.

Photo credit: David Brazier / Christian Aid

Endnotes

1 Francis Crick, the Astonishing Hypothesis (Scriber, 1994), p.3.

2 *Laborem Exercens*, #25 (italics original).

A Theology of Hope:
Marking 80 years of Christian Aid

Humanity has seen enormous progress in the eighty years since Christian Aid was founded. There is much to be thankful for.

But the world feels especially precarious right now, with military spending replacing overseas development, and climate chaos looming. What reasons are there to be hopeful for the future?

This short report, jointly authored by Christian Aid and the think tank Theos, takes an honest look at hope. It spells out the bad reasons – secular and religious – to be hopeful, but also the deep, theological ones.

Ultimately, it argues that it is the reliability of God and God's creation, the reality of human agency, the power of human creativity, and the significance of human trust (or 'faith') that offer us the most robust reasons for hope.

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Front cover image: Majdi Fathi/Christian Aid

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