Love builds hope

It can feel as though hope is in short supply at the moment. We roll from one crisis to the next, barely catching our breath between each one. The simple task of keeping going is so exhausting that our chances of being able to discover any significant sources of hope feel slim and often beyond our grasp.

The season of Advent and the approach of Christmas, however, are a powerful reminder that, contrary to appearances, hope does glimmer around us. It just doesn’t look like we expect it to look. On one level this shouldn’t surprise us. Jesus, hope for all the world, certainly didn’t look like the people of his day expected him to look. The Jews of the first century had all their hopes pinned on a powerful, majestic king - what they got instead was a baby; they expected him to be in a palace - instead he was found where animals eat. The light that shone so vividly in the darkness was certainly nothing like anyone had thought he would be.

At this time of year, and especially this year as we trudge onwards through what feels like never-ending Covid uncertainty, fear and grief, it is worth reminding ourselves again and again that hope has always appeared among us at an unexpected time and in unexpected form. The Jesus whose birth we prepare to celebrate brings the kind of hope we can neither imagine nor anticipate.

One of my favourite strands of the Advent wait, as we approach Christmas, is that in this season our waiting coincides with that of Mary’s, waiting for the birth of her baby. It is almost impossible for us to comprehend quite how much Gabriel’s announcement of Jesus’ birth turned Mary’s life on its head. One moment she was a normal young woman

Suggested Scripture

Luke 1:39-56
1 Corinthians 13:1-7
feeling change, circumstances may not be different but how we feel about them shifts. When we reach out in love, our ability to make sense of the world improves and our sense of hope ignites. It is when we are grounded in love and compassion that our horizon shifts and our view of the world changes.

It is so easy to imagine that we need to go looking for hope, that we need to generate it, somehow; that if we try hard enough we’ll be able to conjure hope by our own efforts. The story of Mary and Elizabeth reminds us that we don’t find hope - hope finds us. Hope creeps up on us when we least expect it; hope can spring up in even the darkest and most despairing of times and one of the factors that causes it to happen is love. When we can forget ourselves sufficiently to care deeply for those around us, when we reach with compassion beyond our own needs, anxieties and concerns, then hope can stir. This hope, however, is not a thin, inward looking hope for ourselves but a hope for the whole world, the world that God created and loved so much that he sent his only Son - the unexpected, unimagined embodiment of hope.

Christian Aid’s theme this Advent and Christmas is precisely this - that love builds hope, when we reach out beyond ourselves to care for God’s world, then hope grows and grows. Love and hope are profoundly intertwined. Jesus, hope of the world, then we love, hope is built. Or as the apostle Paul put it in 1 Corinthians 13 – ‘faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love’.

At first glance this recognition seems odd. Surely hope is to be found in external things? In a change of circumstances maybe? Or a reassurance that all is not as it seems? Perhaps hope is found in a hint of something new, that something better is round the corner? But on reflection it makes perfect sense that love builds hope. It is in relationship that our