

When we look around at the world we live in, when we see all the things that are happening in these times, we can't help wondering where God is. In all troubled and uncertain times, the one thing we need is hope. Life cannot be fully lived without hope. Life is nothing without hope. In the Inferno of his *Divine Comedy*, Dante said that above the gates of Hell were written the words: 'Abandon Hope All You Who Enter Here.' Which, for us, is an impossible prospect to accept. Hope is from God – anxiety, panic and fear – which are presently dominating many people's lives – are not. The word 'panic' comes from the name of the ancient Greek god Pan – half man, half goat – who was the god of nature, wild and uncontrollable and unpredictable. This is how we have been experiencing nature in the form of a pandemic.

Hope is an expression of divine love touching the human heart. But we have to come to know what authentic hope is. Authentic hope is never misplaced or in vain, even when all hope seems to have gone. We often say: 'Oh, it's hopeless...' but we don't truly mean it. Hope is like walking towards the sun: casts all our fears behind us, like shadows.

“I hope it doesn’t rain tomorrow” – that’s not authentic hope...

“I hope you have a good flight”- that’s not authentic either...

“I hope you enjoy the concert” – neither is that...

“I hope you get lucky on the lottery” – and that certainly isn’t.

Hope isn’t some vague wish that things will turn out the way we want them to – because in this life they hardly ever do. Authentic hope is actually *trust* – that’s exactly what it is – and trust is never in the weather or a performance or the lottery; trust is always in a *person*. Trust is an exchange of deep confidence between persons. It is a radical characteristic of being human. Trust helps us to get through even the worst of times and it is the womb that gives birth to joy. There is nothing sentimental or soft about this joy – it has nothing to do with what we call ‘happiness’. Unlike happiness, it does not depend on outward circumstances. It is a wellspring within each one of us, whether we learn to drink from it or not.

It isn't just the pandemic, either: the present suffering being inflicted on the people of Ukraine – terrible though it is – is not the only example of violence, aggression, conflict and persecution. There have always been wars somewhere in the world since primitive man first turned a stone into a weapon. Even so, we can still hope, because if authentic hope is trust, and if trust is always in a person, then our trust must be in the Person of Jesus Christ, who said in the gospel of John from which today's reading comes: "Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." (14:27). And in Luke, he said: "There is no need to be afraid, little flock." (12:32). The 14th century world that Julian of Norwich lived in was a very troubled one: she, too, knew what a pandemic was, because at the time she was receiving her revelations, the Black Death – bubonic plague, as we know it – had wiped out two-thirds of the population of Europe. If that wasn't enough, England and France had started the so-called 'Hundred Years War', climate change had caused heavy rains and cold winters that destroyed crops, and there was a severe, widespread shortage of food.

Yet despite all this – actually, it was probably *because* of it – the Lord said to her: ‘All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.’ Although the evidence in the world all around her suggested quite the opposite, Julian trusted in the Person of Jesus Christ.

One of my favourite quotations about hope in the midst of overwhelming darkness comes from the third volume – *The Return of the King* – of J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*. Frodo and Sam are wandering through Mordor, at the end of their strength, seemingly utterly defeated. Then Sam sees something:

“There, peeping among the cloud-wrack above a dark tor high up in the mountains, Sam saw a white star twinkle for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart, and as he looked up out of the forsaken land, hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach.”

Hope is trust and trust brings joy. Like the early disciples, like Julian of Norwich and like Sam, that's exactly what we need right now.