

### **It's the hope that kills**

I don't know how well you travel on overnight flights. I've always thought I could fall asleep anywhere, I am pretty good at dozing off at inappropriate times and in inappropriate places. But our recent trip to Cape Town has proven me wrong. Not having prepared very well on the way out I barely slept more than a few hours. So, on the return flight I prepared; I had a couple of nice glasses of wine, I took one of those vegan gummies from health shops that send you off easily, I had my eye mask, and headphones. I was ready. And nothing. Nothing happened. It didn't help that I was in the middle seat and the lady on the aisle seat was settling down for the night, blanket, headphones, eye mask, neck pillow, which of course meant that I instantly needed to go to the loo. With all this going on I gave up and thought I'd watch something to send me to sleep.

I chose Ted Lasso, a series based on an English football team struggling with their performance. After an acrimonious divorce the team comes under the ownership of the ex-wife of the previous owner, who hires an American football manager to help their fortunes. Her real ambition though is to ruin the team, to ruin her ex-husband's pride and joy. This is painfully clear when Ted Lasso turns up and obviously has no understanding of the game! Her plan

seems to be working too well, until Lasso's cutesy over positive and optimistic personality and approach begins to have results. Faced with relegation the team pull together and the last episode is the cliff hanger, will they or won't they survive? Ted is full of hope, encouraging everyone from players to fans to have hope, until the very down-to-earth London pub landlady says to him simply, "it's the hope that kills, Ted." In typical British phlegmatic pragmatism, "it's the hope that kills."

In some ways that resonates with this feast that we celebrate today, the feast of Candlemas, or to give it its full title, The Presentation of Christ in the Temple. We turn away from the hope of Advent, Christmas and Epiphany and we turn to Lent, to the Passion and the Cross, it's the hope that kills.

Candlemas is the hinge on which the liturgical year turns, just as the seasons turn with it. There are lots of traditions associated with Candlemas that are now largely forgotten.

- Blessing of candles, usually used for prayer
- Poland - candles used in a storm
- Candlemas eve - all green decorations have to be taken down

- bears and wolves come out today to check the weather to see if hibernation is over or not
- Weather - "If Candlemas day is clear and bright/ Winter will have another bite / If Candlemas day brings cloud and rain / winter is gone and will not come again"
- Groundhog Day
- In the Church's year it is the end of the Epiphany season, we turn from looking back at Christmas and turn now to face Easter, "the candles invite us to praise and to pray when Christmas greets Easter on Candlemas Day"

And it is the hinge on which our hope turns. We see that very clearly in the gospel reading. In some ways this is Luke's version of Matthew's Magi story. But where Matthew has gentiles coming to the child Jesus to announce the hope for all nations, Luke uses the righteous poor, the *anawim*, of Israel to do the job. The shepherds showed us that there was hope for those on the edges, the not quite acceptable. Simeon and Anna in their old age and righteousness show us that there is hope for all.

We have this sense of waiting with both of them; Simeon, we are told, was waiting for the consolation of Israel; Anna declared who Jesus was to those who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem. These are the righteous, the exact same word used of Joseph in Matthew, the ones who had hope that God would not abandon Israel but would deliver them and through them the whole world.

These are the ones who kept hope alive through the dark days of invasion, of weak leaders and puppet kings, of tyrants who took whatever or wherever they wanted, of rising nationalistic religion that painted God in black and white, of a scared, anxious and complaint religious hierarchy who controlled rather than released. It was the righteous few, like Simeon and Anna, old and past it, at the end of their ministries and their lives, it was exactly these who kept hope alive.

Because it is the hope that kills. It is the hope that kills defeat and despair; it is the hope that kills division and demonisation of others; it is the hope that kills certainty; it is the hope that kills the sense that we are ever past it, too young or too old to serve God; it is the hope that kills the fear that God has forgotten us.

It was the hope of the prophet Malachi that God would come, that would come to the temple that kept Simeon and Anna there, that kept them alive, that kept them praying and serving. And on this day, in this place, the Holy Spirit tells them their hope has come. And so, they come to see the promise of God at last, to see ... a 40 day old baby. Four thousand years of promise and prophecy and they find a baby.

How easy it would have been for them to despair, for their hope to be dashed. But Simeon and Anna are people of attention, hope always needs us to pay attention. They knew that God worked through the small and insignificant, they knew their history that a childless couple could be the parents of countless descendants, that a slave prisoner could rise to be second to Pharaoh, that an exile can be a liberator, that the outnumbered can defeat the mighty, that it is the hope that kills all that would defeat them.

Pay attention. Epiphany is the season of paying attention. The Magi paid attention to the sky and the stars and knew that something had changed; John the Baptist pays attention to the prompting of God and baptises Jesus; the servants pay attention to Mary's words and water becomes wine; the disciples

pay attention to who Jesus is and find the Messiah; Simeon and Anna pay attention to the Spirit and find God's final word on the promise made millennia before: Jesus.

We need to hear this as we turn with the season. As we prepare for Lent, we need to be people who pay attention, to our own lives and our own callings, where are the shoots of growth, where are the places we need to weed? We need to pay attention to the world around us, where and what do we need to pray for, where do we need to get involved? We need to pay attention to where our hope is, to not miss the small, insignificant things that it would be easy to dismiss but is exactly where God is meeting us.

This is the end of Luke's Infancy Gospel, the focus will now be on Jesus' ministry, on the man the baby becomes. This is the end of the Christmas season, but this is when the work of Christmas begins, as the theologian Howard Thurman wrote:

*When the song of the angels is stilled,  
When the star in the sky is gone,  
When the kings and princes are home,*

*When the shepherds are back with their flock,*

*The work of Christmas begins:*

*To find the lost,*

*To heal the broken,*

*To feed the hungry,*

*To release the prisoner,*

*To rebuild the nations,*

*To bring peace among brothers,*

*To make music in the heart.*

To have attentive hope that the promise given will be the promise received at Easter. That the truth of the Nunc Dimittis, Simeon's song, is the hope that kills our despair, our grief and our fear and puts our hope in the light that lightens the nations.

There are 10 episodes roughly 30 minutes each of the first season of Ted Lasso – I watched them all! And as the cabin crew got ready for our descent, guess what, I finally fell asleep. Christmas is over but that doesn't mean it is time for us to fall asleep; this is the time for attentive hope. We will carry our candles out of here this morning as small tokens of hope and reminders that

**Year A**  
**Candlemas**  
**Malachi 3:1-5**  
**Hebrews 2:14-end**  
**Luke 2:22-40**

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you and I are called to do the work of Christmas, to be the light to lighten  
Berwick and beyond.