

FALLING AND RISING *Christmas 1, 2017, Cathedral*

You have to say we're an optimistic lot, us humans. At the turn of the year millions will celebrate the secular hope that next year will somehow, perhaps magically, be better for the world. And look at us in Aotearoa, with that amazing feat of re-opening State Highway One after mind-boggling scenes of disruption followed by heroic reconstruction. We continue to dance relatively happily along the Pacific Rim, all the while aware (in the back of our minds) of seismologists advising us of the possibility of a quake even bigger than the expected "Big One".

Hope springs eternal, and we seem to be programmed to realise that despair – however reasonable – is never a good space to be in; and I say this in the face of our terrible suicide statistics.

Simeon and Anna are people of prophetic hope in today's Gospel reading. Simeon's response to the infant Jesus looks forward to the boy being Israel's glory and Light to the non-Jewish (or Gentile) nations. We are invited to see Simeon as being at the end of the Old Testament Prophetic line, along with Anna, who is perhaps the first evangelist of the New Testament, telling everyone about this special child.

But Simeon's prophecy is not sentimental. The child will be for the falling and rising of many in Israel: some will stumble because of him, and some will be lifted up. And the experience of his rejection and execution will pierce his mother's heart.

A good many years ago now I spent some months preaching on the importance of being authentic as a human being (before God, self, and others) and took as my watchword the saying of Irenaus of Lyon that *The glory of God is humanity alive*. I am sure you will appreciate that preachers are often speaking to themselves first.

We can appear to be more-or-less alive, but of course we can also be more-or-less dead to the breadth of possibility for mind, body, spirit, emotions. A woman who had been hearing these sermons asked to meet with me. I was aware of how fragile, even broken she was, but I knew nothing of her story, other than she was divorced with teenage children and that she had a job in town.

I realised quite quickly that she had pasted on a layer of charismatic Christianity which had stopped working as a band-aid against her pain.

She came to talk to me because she had a little seed of hope that perhaps she could recover from her life wounds. Perhaps you get what you preach for, but I quickly realised that I was in it for the long haul, and that also I would need professional supervision to avoid becoming enmeshed with the content of this journey we were undertaking.

She told me that she had been abused by her father throughout her childhood, and that her mother knew about the abuse and chose to blame the child. Indeed, she demonized the little girl and made her eat with separately washed cutlery and plates. The mother never called her by name or even spoke to her directly. Even after the father went to prison for abusing someone else's child the mother refused to accept the reality of the abuse of her daughter.

Imagine carrying this burden of abuse and rejection through raising her own children in spite of an unsurprisingly abusive marriage. I knew that we had to find a spark of hope in order for any freedom to begin. Was there any time, or any thing in her life where she wasn't consumed with fear and emotional pain? There was, just an ember or a flicker – but we were able to pray and work into that speck of hope and watch it grow.

What I remember still so vividly is the evening, many sessions later, when very hesitantly, she stammered out one of the most destructive memories – that her father had kept a knife under the mattress, with which he used to ritually threaten to kill her if she ever told. So real was this threat to her that even telling me about it caused the irrational terror that even from the grave her father would be able to come and kill her.

So very gently we tested the possibility of her father carrying out the threat, and little by little she began to find new freedom and courage.

At this time her mother lived quite close by and she would do the dutiful thing and visit when other family members came around, Christmas, for example. But her mother still would talk about “her” and “she” and withheld any kind of affection even while bestowing it on others.

One day when we were talking she said “My mother is still horrible to me and I don't believe she will ever be any different while she chooses to

blame me for what happened. I realise now that I must give up the hope that if I am good enough she will change and love me after all.”

I think this is one of the most profoundly courageous things I've heard anyone say. She had finally realised that the sword had indeed pierced her own soul, and that costly truth would set her free.

Eventually the time came for me to move away, and she continued in counselling for some time afterwards. One day I received a letter from her. She said “I have peace now. I have moved away from my family and started a new life here.”

I'm reminded of the power of hope, the Christian hope, in the words of the Christmas Gospel: *The light shone in the darkness, and the darkness could not overcome it.*

I recently found these words of John Donne (not the poet) and thought they were helpful:

When hope does awaken, an entire life awakens along with it. One comes fully to life. It begins to seem indeed that one has never lived before. One awakens to a life that is eternal in prospect, a life that opens up before one all the way to death and beyond, a life that seems able to endure death and survive it. Wherever hope rises, life rises. When one first enters upon the spiritual adventure, hope rises where there was no hope before, where there was a life of “quiet desperation,” and life rises too, the life of the spiritual adventure, the sense of being on a journey in time. There is something to live for, where before there was nothing.

2018 will be a year in which we will need the “Living Hope”, not cheap sentimental hope, but the child destined for the falling and rising of many.

- Ian Render