

Jesus Christ: Our Hope

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MJCF Feb. 5, 2023

Luke 18:35-43

Once every year, Anabaptist/Mennonite churches celebrate Anabaptist World Fellowship Sunday. It usually happens on a Sunday near January 21st which is when the Anabaptist movement officially began in 1525.

“A small group of Christian reformers gathered for a secret worship service in Zurich, Switzerland. The group was frustrated by the hesitance of their leader Ulrich Zwingli, to enact the changes to Catholic rituals they agreed Scripture demanded, especially regarding the Mass and the practice of infant baptism. In their reading of Scripture, true Christian baptism assumed a conscious commitment to follow Jesus – something no infant could do. So, on January 21st, 1525, this small group agreed to baptize each other as adults.”

They understood baptism “to symbolize the presence of the Holy Spirit in the gift of God’s grace, a commitment to a life of daily discipleship, and membership in a new community of God’s people.” Their opponents labeled them Anabaptists (or “re-baptisers”). At that time “rebaptism” was a crime punishable by death, and many were killed for their faith. During their trials the authorities were often surprised at their knowledge of scripture. Anabaptists believed the Bible calls us to follow Jesus in life. And, that to follow Jesus means to follow the way of love rather than violence. Even in a time of war, they would rather be killed than take up a guns to kill other people.

As I’ve shared at other times, today, the Anabaptist/Mennonite style of being Christian could be summed up in three points: “Jesus is the centre of our faith, Community is the centre of our life, and Reconciliation is the centre of our work.” Other branches of Christianity would be similar, except they would emphasise different areas. For example, Pentecostal Christians might emphasise the work of the Holy Spirit over all else. Some other Christians emphasise the Bible over all else. Anabaptists also emphasise the Bible, but they understand that there are many different ways that people believe the Bible. You can use the Bible to say almost anything to support your own perspective. For Anabaptists, it is important to focus the words of the Bible through discussion in community, and through God’s greatest revelation, Jesus Christ. Anything learned from the Bible needs to fit with what Jesus taught, and how he lived.

There are now over 2.13 million baptised believers in 86 countries, with most Anabaptists living in African countries. Each year, World Fellowship Sunday resources focus on a different theme and part of the world. This year, the focus is on Africa, with the theme, “Jesus Christ, Our Hope.” <slide1>

In today’s scripture reading from the book of Luke, Jesus heals a blind beggar. The beggar places his hope in Jesus, and in the end, is healed. As in many of the stories of Jesus, we find similar stories in Matthew and Mark as well as Luke. In Matthew’s account we read of two blind beggars (Mtt.20:30), and in Mark’s account the beggar is given a name, Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46). Beyond this, the stories are pretty much the same. When the beggar hears that Jesus is passing by, he starts to shout, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” These words show that he was a believer in Jesus. He must have heard how Jesus had been healing many people. When those in the crowd sternly order him to be quiet, he shouts even more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” His hope in Jesus was stronger than anyone who would scold him for shouting out. He would have certainly been someone of very low status. He could not be equal to others because of his blindness. An outcast in society, he would have been considered impure by the Jews. But, Jesus is the hope for the hopeless, and he hears their cries. Above the noise of the crowd, Jesus hears him and orders the man to be brought to him. He asks him what he wants him to do, and the beggar replies, “Lord, let me see again.” Sometimes we’re afraid to even ask God for something we need. Jesus Christ is ready to work in our lives, but we need to invite him in. He does not force his way because God highly respects our freewill to choose or reject him.

In Matthew’s version of the story, it says that Jesus had compassion. As the Son of God, he reflected God’s love, a love that ultimately led him to death on a cross. In his resurrection we see that

the power of God is stronger than death. Our sins are forgiven and we now have a living hope in him. After Jesus restores the beggar's sight, he becomes a follower of Jesus. He and all the people praise and glorify God. The focus here is on God. In Bible stories where Jesus heals the blind there is a spiritual as well as a physical meaning. Many people are spiritually blind, but when they come to Jesus, they find healing and finally "see". They finally understand the good news of God's great love for us.

We can easily get bogged down with the problems all around us, and even in our prayers much of our energy may be on giving God all the details of our problems. And, although it is good to honestly pour out our true feelings in prayer, it is important to learn to bring our eyes back to God and God's Son, Jesus. The more we focus on the greatness of God, the smaller our problems seem to become. I may feel like my problems are a huge mountain blocking my way. How can I ever get over this mountain! But, as I meditate on the greatness of God, I start to remember just how powerful God is. God created the universe! I am also reminded of the depth of God's love, how God cares for each person, no matter how insignificant or even how good or bad we are! Pretty soon it feels as if my mountain of a problem has moved! The problem may still be there, but I'm left with hope and a confidence that God will lead me through somehow.

In the material provided for World Fellowship Sunday there are testimonies of hope from people in various parts of Africa. <slide2> Virginia Makanza, a member of the Brethren in Christ Church in Zimbabwe shares this story:

I was in a dark space June to July 2021 when my husband and my mom fell ill at the same time. My mother later passed on in August. Then in February to March 2022, my husband fell ill again. It took more than two weeks for the doctors to come up with a diagnosis. Meanwhile, I watched helplessly as he suffered: weak body, not eating, losing weight, drenching sweats. I almost despaired.

At such times, the mind questions and almost blames God. I then remembered that God never promised a problem-free life and God reminded me that I was not alone and that I needed to look up and call to God (as it says in Psalm 121, "I lift my eyes to the hills – from where will my help come? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth").

I like how she focuses on God, and shares how it's not helpful to focus in other areas. Here's what she says:

I learned not to focus on the situation, because this would fill me with despair; not to focus on myself, as I would then start feeling pity for myself; not to look for someone to blame, as that would lead me to complaining; and not to focus on the present, as that would make me miss the point of what God wanted to achieve in my life.

I learned that hope is a position of optimism: God is good; God is working for our good; and God is in control. Above all, these dark moments have a beginning, a middle, and an end; they last for only a season.

And in all this we have to remember the greatness of God and who we are in Christ.

I can never downplay the power of family relationships in getting through this bleak period, especially the encouragement and support from my biological and spiritual family (the church), and the hope they created. What would I be without this blessed hope in my Lord? My husband became better and we cannot sing praises enough. I keep hoping for many more days of good health and happiness.

This is one of many stories of hope that believers in Christ are sharing. So, what about us? What about you? Where is your hope? It's so easy to focus on our problems rather than on Jesus Christ. Virginia had a tough life, but she worked hard to look to God rather than on just her problems. For many of us who live pretty comfortable lives compared to much of the rest of the world, it's easy to forget our need for God. If I were to imagine myself as the blind beggar, after calling out to Jesus, if people in the crowd scold me and tell me to "Shut up!" I might just give up. "Oh well, so much for that

idea. Jesus is too important to stop for me...” That attitude would reflect the possibility that I’m too content in my situation. I confess that sometimes my hunger and thirst for God are not so strong – not like the beggar who kept his focus on calling out to Jesus even when scolded by the crowd.

At times when we have sensed Jesus’ presence and he asks us, “What do you want me to do for you?” It forces us to admit our deepest need for his divine healing. Instead, we might be tempted to say, “Oh, I’m OK, but thanks anyway. Maybe I’ll accept your offer some other time. I’m good...”. It’s not always easy to admit our deepest need and place our hope in God, unless we are desperate. Jesus Christ is our hope! He is the hope for the whole world. May we recognize that we are all like that blind beggar. We all have areas where we have trouble seeing. May God grant us the courage to place our deepest hope in Christ! And, as it says in 1st Peter 3:15, may we then be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks us the reason for the hope we have, with gentleness and respect. Let’s pray.

Loving God, you are the almighty Creator of the universe! Yet, you have shown your great love for us through your Son, Jesus Christ. Forgive us for those times that we forget all that you’ve done for us. We get so wrapped up in our personal problems that we forget that you are ultimately in control. Forgive us for spending so much energy to put our hope in other areas rather than coming to Jesus Christ. O Lord, thank-you that with you nothing is impossible. The possibilities are limitless. When things seem to be at a dead end, you make a way. May all our hope be in you, through Christ our Lord, Amen.