



## Christian Hope

ALVIN N. ROGNESS

President Emeritus, Luther Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota

In one of his essays G. K. Chesterton calls temperance and justice the pagan virtues, and he calls faith, hope, and love the Christian virtues. Then he goes on to say that love is nothing if it does not pardon the unpardonable; faith is nothing if it does not believe the incredible; and hope is nothing if it does not hope when everything looks hopeless.

For me hope has been the casualty of my years. I haven't lost it; it has been hard-pressed. I was a boy of twelve when we had finished making the world safe for democracy, and when we had fought one war to end all wars. And I grew up in a village where I had nine uncles and aunts either in town or nearby and a bevy of other relatives. I grew up with the strength of the herd and the security and safety of that kind of a world. If anybody attacked me, he would have to take on all my uncles and aunts. And I knew that.

In the 1920s things ran along rather smoothly until toward the end when we got into some economic difficulties. That intensified through the 30s. I finished seminary in 1932. Although many of us didn't have calls right away, I obtained an interim arrangement and received a call eighteen months later.

By the early 30s we knew that while Kaiser Wilhelm and Czar Nicholas had disappeared from the scene, we did not have democracies in their places; we had Stalin, Hitler, and Mussolini. Moreover, as the decade wore on, storm clouds began to gather, and before the decade was done, we were in the second great war. When that was ended with those terrific, hideous punctuation marks at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, nobody talked about having fought two wars to end all wars. Already there was a murmur and the fear of the third, which my cousin in the air force said they called the "two-hour war."

I think the year 1945 was a watershed for me. Prior to that, I had more or less clung to the optimism of the early part of the century, thinking that progress might be in the very nature of things. Of course I hadn't gotten that notion from the Bible, but it was current, and most people were buying the idea that day by

day, week by week, year by year, and century by century we were "getting better and better." But now that was gone. I suspect that I was back with biblical realism about that time.

I grew up in a very hopeful time as far as the horizontal hope was concerned. But now I find hope, that kind of hope, hard to come by. And yet I have hope as a child of God and as a member of the body of Christ. I have no trouble with the vertical hope. When I die, I expect him who died for me, and who in baptism claimed me, to put me on my feet again in another and more wonderful part of his kingdom. And I have confidence that at some given time, he is going

to rescue the whole business. He will deliver creation itself from its bondage to decay.

But that time is not yet here. And when I look toward the horizon and not up, I have problems. I want to look into the future because, in the first place, I have fifteen grandchildren, and I want them to have a future with more mercy, justice, and order than I've known in this century. I think that I have a right to hope for that even against the tremendous odds that seem to be there. Furthermore, I have a right to such a hope because with God all things are possible. But the mood is heavy. It is described by Franz Werful in the parable of the camel driver who is being pursued by his enraged camel. In order to escape, he jumps into a well, and while falling his clothes catch on a root growing out of the wall. There he hangs. He looks and sees the maddened eyes of the camel looking down upon him. He looks down into the bottom of the well and sees the fiery eyes of a dragon. And as his eyes get accustomed to the light, he notices that there are two mice—one white and one black—taking alternate bites at the base of the root. A very bad situation!

Mr. Werful said that we had hoped to be the driver of the machine, but the machine gone mad has turned upon us and threatens to destroy us. We face the ungovernable machine—like the camel of the parable—on the one hand, and the prospect of catastrophic death—the dragon—on the other. In the meantime, time is running out day and night, as symbolized by the white mouse and the black mouse.

I don't want to believe that the camel is out of control altogether. I want to believe that this tremendous creature that we produced with our technology and science can still be brought under control, and that the world can use this camel in ways that at the moment seem impossible.

We are to hope when things look hopeless, said Chesterton, if we are indeed dealing with Christian hope. I fall back on certain convictions of our faith. Above all, there is the conviction that the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. I don't think God has abandoned his creation. He is going to put an end to it sometime, but as long as it endures, he is in the thick of it. I have no sympathy at all with those who say that Jesus has got to come now because things have gotten so bad, so out of control. I think that is an offense to God. And if it is true that the Lord is coming at an unsuspecting moment, then all these preludes to his coming must thwart him. Perhaps, for all we know, he is going to delay until we get things in order, until we've controlled population, until we have distributed the goods of the world, until we have achieved international peace, until everybody is educated, and everything and everybody are safely and

securely tucked under the canopy of *shalom*. About that time he could come and really surprise us. In any event, as long as we are here, we have responsibilities and tasks to pursue. I think that God is in the thick of it.

Just how God operates, I'm not sure. I have some clues, however. I think one thing that he does is to establish bridgeheads in the minds and the hearts of people. Then he maneuvers those people into positions where they definitely influence history. I think back to the story of Sir William Wilberforce of England who at the age of 20 was elected to Parliament. At the age of 24 he had a decisive Christian experience, or his faith surfaced, and he realized that he was under higher command. He was about at the point of leaving Parliament and going into "religious" work of some kind. But his friend, the younger Pitt, persuaded him to stay in Parliament and throw his whole influence against the slave traffic which was legal at that time in Great Britain.

For 20 years Wilberforce did that, with all the moral suasion and spiritual power that he had, aided of course by good colleagues. And finally, the British Parliament abolished slavery and reimbursed every slaveholder from the public treasury. They handled it much better than we did in this country. The night that the vote was taken, the speaker closed his remarks with these words:

I am thinking tonight of two heads and two pillows. One is the head of Napoleon tossing feverishly on the island of Helena after having left a trail of blood from Jena to Waterloo. One is the man who tonight will see the consummation of his life's work. If I were to choose, I would not choose the pillow of Napoleon. I would choose the head that will rest tonight, after our vote is taken; on the pillow of Wilberforce.

In a small parish in England years ago the pastor reported to his superior that that year the parish had only one addition, one new member—that of a ten-year-old boy, David Livingston.

Where God establishes his bridgeheads no one knows. But are we to doubt that he is in the thick of history? I have a good friend in high places in government who said once that now may be such a moment. This nuclear standoff may finally teach the human race, or teach the nations, that they cannot any longer negotiate from strength. That day is over. They will have to negotiate on the basis of more ethical and moral principles, and not simply threaten each other. Who knows? Who knows?

In the meantime, I have my own orbit. I can try to influence our political leaders. I write letters, and they respond. I can do a little to persuade or convince my representatives that if they are on the side of solving this nuclear madness, we're all for them. They need that support in Congress.

But I also have my more immediate orbit: my wife, my children, my grandchildren, my friends, my church, my school, and my community. That's a small and not a very complex orbit, but it's mine. And if I can be faithful in finding God's will and doing it and proclaiming the Lord's lordship until he comes, isn't it possible that the Lord may take my little orbit and the small orbits of others and put them all together into a kind of woven pattern that will change or leaven history? I think that is altogether possible.

In any event, I have to trust, realizing of course that we could bring catastrophe upon ourselves. The Lord hasn't promised that we are going to have

utopia at all. But I want a future for those who come after me. And I have to try to be patient. Paul says, in so many words, "Now just a minute. Be patient. When you hope for something, you are not hoping for that which is there at your feet. You are hoping for that which isn't there yet. And when you hope that way, you hope with patience." It is very difficult to be patient. Bruce Laingen of the Iran hostages gave a speech and quoted a little adage, "Patience is a heavy drink, that only the strong can drink." I remember Kipling's words to the effect that if you can wait and not be tired by waiting, it is very difficult, but it's one of the things we are asked to do.

In the meantime we do what's at hand. Once when Ignatius Loyola was a student, he was playing a lawn game with his friends. One of his friends, a young monk, asked the others, "What

would you do if the world were to come to an end in two hours?” The first monk said, “I would go to the chapel and pray.” The second said, “I would go to my brother and be reconciled with him.” Ignatius hadn’t said anything. And they said, “Ignatius, what would you do?” He said, “I would finish the game.”

We do what is near at hand. We care for those near at hand and reach out as far as we can. This is our task while we are waiting. God has infinite patience—a day or a thousand years are the same for him. It just could be that this God of infinite patience has much more hope for us and his world than we dare to entertain.