

Youth Leaders

Sharing our hope

Address by Fr Timothy Radcliffe OP at the 2010 CYMFed Congress in London

I would like to talk about hope and about how we help each other to hope. Three priests, a Dominican, a Benedictine and a bishop, were on a boat sailing to across the Pacific. And the boat sunk and they all ended up on a small desert island. After a bit an angel appeared and offered each of them a wish. And so the Dominican thought hard and said to the angel, 'I would like to go home to my brothers in Blackfriars.' 'Wush', and he was gone, like a text message on an Iphone. And then the Benedictine said, 'That Dominican was absolutely right as they always are. I want to go back home to Worth Abbey.' 'Wush' and he was gone. And then the bishop said: 'I am awfully lonely now that they have gone. Could you please send the Dominican and the Benedictine back please?' Wush, wush!

These religious were wise in wanting to be back in their communities. We need each other to keep our hope alive for the future. We have an economic crisis, which means that millions of young people have little prospect of a job in the immediate future. Worst of all we have the prospect of a vast ecological catastrophe which could kill millions of people, especially after the disaster of the Copenhagen conference. What will the planet be like when the young are my age? And so lots of people would rather eat, drink and merry and pretend that the future is not going to happen. That is a form of despair.

Faced with these challenges, the generations need to give each other hope. The older people need to give hope to the young, by believing in their future. And the young give hope to older people, because they are the future. I love the word confident. It comes from the Latin *confidens*, which means believing together.

Let me tell you of a young friend of mine called John. His story is of someone who received and gave hope. John was thrown out of school for taking drugs. Suddenly his world collapsed and he despaired. His parents decided to take him on a holiday to cheer him up. His mother went to collect the tickets from the travel agent, and when she got back to their flat, she found a crowd of people gathered in the street. In the middle was her son. John had jumped from the seventh floor.

She phoned me in Oxford from the hospital in London to ask for my prayers since he had not long to live. I offered to come and she replied that there was no point since John would be dead with an hour. Still, I went since I knew that she would need someone around afterwards. When I got there John was still just alive. The doctor showed me that his core temperature was steadily dropping. He said to me that when it got to a certain level, then he would die, probably in about twenty minutes. I took John's hand and told him that we were praying for him. He had broken every bone in his body, and exploded a lung, and burst his

stomach, but he made a sign with his hand. And finally he wrote in very spindly writing, 'I can pray too.'

Then something extraordinary happened. His core temperature began to rise again, and he survived. It took him six months before he could walk, most of that time spread out on thin mess of silk as his body healed. When I went to see him I had to lie on the floor and face upwards. And now he is indeed fine. He got married last year. He is a successful artist. The turning point was when we prayed together. When I told him that we were praying, he began to live, and when he told us that he was praying, we began to hope.

But what is the basis of our hope? How do we dare to go on trusting that God will give us a future even when we cannot imagine it, when we cannot find a job and we have fallen out with the person whom we most love? Let me share with you an experience that I had in Rwanda, just at the beginning of the troubles. It was one of the most important of my life. It transformed my understanding of what it means to hope and so I have told it often.

We were due to drive north to visit our sisters who were looking after refugees. The Belgian Ambassador came and warned us that violence was breaking out throughout the country and that we should stay at home. But we were young and foolish, and so we got around the army road blocks to stop anyone leaving the capital, and we found ourselves in the midst of chaos. It was a terrible day, having to get out of the car to confront groups of rebels and soldiers, carrying guns and machetes. I did not think that we would live until the end of the day. The worst was visiting a hospital filled with children mutilated with land mines. I remember one kid who had lost both his legs and an arm and an eye, and his father was sitting by the bedside weeping. I went out into the bush and wept too. And a kid with one leg hopped beside me to console me. They could not afford crutches.

And then we went to visit the sisters. I knew that I was expected to say something but what could I say? I had come across more suffering on that day than ever before in my life. I had no words. And then I remembered that Jesus had left us something to be done in memory of him. We could remember that night before he died, which was the darkest moment in human history. One of his friends had sold him, and his beloved Peter was about to betray him. And most of the rest would run away. And when everything seemed lost and there was no future, he did this extraordinary thing. When he was having supper with his friends he took bread and gave it to them saying 'This is my body, given for you.' When the only future seemed to be the cross, then he made this mad, generous, loving gesture. That is the basis of our hope. Every time that we gather as a community for the Eucharist, we are taken back to that dark moment, and that unexpected gift of the future. The last Supper seemed the end, the *last* supper, but it was just the beginning, the first Eucharist.

Now, Jesus did two extraordinary things in that moment. First of all he gave the disciples space and time. He was just with them. And secondly he gave them himself. All hopeful loving, or loving hope, needs both of those, the gift of space and the gift of oneself. That is what we older people give you who are young, and what you can give us. Let's look at each of them.

Jesus gives them space and time. If I had known that soldiers were soon coming to arrest me, and that I would be denied by these very same friends to whom I had given everything, I

would be in a state of total panic, and very angry too. But Jesus showed his hope by quietly being with them, sharing a meal, sharing his last words, talking to them. Now is the only moment that exists. Now is when the future starts.

God loves us by giving us space. He says 'Let there be light' and it is. He lets it be. Let there be Archbishop Vincent and Abbot Christopher and all of us and we are. God's love is unobtrusive. Bertrand Russell said that if when he died it discovered that God did exist, then he would say to him, 'Well you should have made your existence more obvious.' But God does not overwhelm us. God lets us breathe.

The most beautiful thing that you give anyone when you love them is nothing, the space to be, and speak or be silent, as they need. Our busy, frenetic world is filled with meetings and projects, and trying to achieve targets and goals. But when you really love someone, you do not sit down with a list of targets to be achieved. You do not fill in an assessment form at the end. You are just with them for no purpose at all, to speak and listen as you wish.

Really listening to another person is one of the most beautiful arts and toughest disciplines. When I was Master of the Dominican Order I had the extraordinary privilege of meeting every one of the brethren alone for about half an hour. It was also demanding because there are several thousand of us. Once at the end of a long day in Mexico, I was with a friar who was an old friend of mine, but I was longing for the conversation to finish so that I could lie down. And he said to me, 'Timothy, that is the third time that you have looked at your watch.' I learned my lesson. I always put a clock behind the chair in the future.

Sometimes we are afraid just to be with people because we do not know what to say or where the conversation will go. When I was a young and very inexperienced chaplain, a beautiful young student came to see me, to confess to her very exotic sex life. My imagination boggled as she owned up to things that I had never considered even possible. I was so terrified of what I could possibly say when she stopped speaking, that I stopped listening to her and so did indeed have nothing to say when she stopped. But if one listens now, with all one's heart and mind, then what you are to say in that hour will indeed be given!

Jean Vanier, the founder of L'Arche, says that it was caring for people with disabilities who taught him to love people by letting them be. He mentioned a young guy called Eric was extremely physically disabled. Jean said that when he washed Eric in his bath, he had to let Eric take his time. He could not force the pace. Eric always found it difficult to pee with accuracy. One day he managed it without missing, and so the community opened a bottle of champagne to celebrate!

So Jesus gave them space and time to speak and listen. He let them be. But he also did something slightly in tension with that, he gave them himself. This is my body and I give it to you. He gave himself unconditionally.

The other side of our hopeful love is that we give ourselves to each other. This can take the form of friendship, of commitment, and even finally of marriage when you say to someone else, 'This is my body and I give myself to you, now and for ever'.

It can take the form of incredible generosity, when you risk your life. Someone who influenced me enormously was my brother, Pierre Claverie, the bishop of Oran in Algeria, who was assassinated for his opposition to terrorism. When I visited his diocese, it was a dangerous time. When we drove around the diocese Pierre had to phone ahead to see if the terrorists had put up any blockades on the road in which he might be caught, for he would be executed. The diocese had opened libraries so that young Muslim students could go in and study when they wished. But just before my arrival two gunmen had gone in and shot the two religious who ran one of the libraries. While we were driving around on the edge of the Sahara, Pierre was wondering where he could find a replacement for them. And an old friar in the back of the car said, 'Pierre, I will go. I am old and I will have to die sometime. I will go to the library.' Here I am, I offer myself.

Loving people well means finding the right balance between giving them space and giving them yourself. If we just give people space, then they may feel left alone, neglected. If we throw ourselves at people, then they may feel overwhelmed. I had an email from a married woman recently. She loves her husband utterly and cannot bear to be parted from him. She cannot tolerate any separation. And so naturally he has to escape in order to breathe.

God is the perfect lover. God gives us so much space that some people do not even notice his presence at all. But in Jesus God gives us himself, unconditionally, holding back nothing.

Finally, we express our hope by celebrating. The first thing that Jesus did to preach the Kingdom was to eat and drink with people. He celebrated with them. He celebrated them. He turned the water into wine at Cana so that the party could go on. He was even accused of being a drunkard and a glutton.

Every Sunday we gather to celebrate Mass. It does not always seem like a celebration! The most moving Eucharist that I have ever attended was in Paris. It was for the Christmas Mass for the tramps, celebrated in a big tent in the centre of Paris. The priest was a Spanish Dominican, Pedro Meca, who lives like a tramp on the streets of Paris and comes back to his brethren just once a week for a shower and a big meal. I think that the brethren hope that he has the shower before the meal! All the destitute, the homeless, and the bums were invited. A thousand came. It was a celebration of intense if sometimes befuddled happiness. The altar was made of cardboard, to celebrate the Christ who was born for all those who live in cardboard boxes today. When Pedro pulled the cork of the wine bottle at the offertory, cheers rang out. Afterwards everyone was invited to a superb banquet.. That was a sign of the Kingdom. That was a gesture of hope that reached across the divisions of rich and poor and spoke of the joy of the Kingdom now.

So my hope is that you will be bearers of hope. The future may look bleak. We may wonder where on earth we are headed. Each of us will live through moments of crisis when the future seems unsure. But every Eucharist we remember the moment when there seemed to be no future except the cross, when it all seemed over, and then Jesus made this extraordinary act of generosity and hope. And so we need never be afraid. We can share our hope with each other.