

# Introduction

## What Can I Hope For? What Can I Do? Free Action

In this first chapter we will look at the theological connection between hope and action. The different answers to Immanuel Kant's question, 'What can I hope for?' always affect the various choices of action open to us in response to the question, 'What should I do?' We become active in so far as we hope. We hope in so far as we can see into the sphere of future possibilities. We undertake what we think is possible. If, for example, we hope that the world will continue to be as it is now, we shall keep things as they are. If we hope for an alternative future, we shall already change things now as far as possible in accord with that. If the future is closed, then nothing more is possible; we cannot do anything more. Unlike Kant, I am talking about an acting impelled by hope, one not in the mode of 'ought' but in the mode of 'can'. An action sustained by hope is a free action, not one under compulsion.

Hope is always a tense expectation and rouses the attentiveness of all our senses, so that we can grasp the chances for the things we hope for, wherever and whenever they present themselves. That distinguishes hope from mere expectation or a patient waiting. When all the senses are attentive, reason is the vehicle which conveys the knowledge of change. We then perceive things not just as they have become and now exist but also in the different ways they could be. We perceive things not only *sic stantibus* but also *sic fluentibus*, as fluid not static, and try to realize their potentialities for change in a positive direction.

Realism teaches us a sense for reality—for what is. Hope awakens our sense for potentiality—for what could be. In concrete action we always relate the potentiality to what exists, the present to the future. If our actions were directed only to the future, we should fall victim to utopias; if they were related only to the present, we should miss our chances.<sup>1</sup>

In hope we link far-off goals with goals within reach. What is last of all gives meaning to the next-to-last. So in the imaginations of hope there is always a superabundance of what is hoped for. It is only when we want what is now impossible that we arrive at the limits of our possibilities. It is good to stress this added value of hope, for we generally fall short of our possibilities. Lethargy is the real enemy of every hope.

### What Must I Fear? What Should I Do? Necessary Action

We become aware of the future not only in our hopes for better times in the future but also, if not even for the most part, in our fears and anxieties. We are worried by the possibility of all the things that can happen. Fear and anxiety are early warning systems of possible dangers and are necessary for living. As long as potential dangers can be discerned and named, they give rise to fears which impel us to do what is necessary in good time, and so to avert the dangers. But if discernible threats swell into insubstantial dangers, they result in diffuse anxieties in the face of nothingness or the total write-off of the world and one's own existence. These anxieties generally lead to despairing resignation and paralysed inactivity or to overreactions which only intensify the dangers.

As well as the fundamental question, 'What can I hope for?' Immanuel Kant should have asked the reverse of this question, 'What must I fear?' But Kant was an 'Enlightened' optimist—theologically, as he himself said, a millennialist. Every answer to the question about our fear affects what we do. Our sense for the possible is roused at least as much by the fear as by the hope.<sup>2</sup> Anxiety is concerned for our lives—hope, for our fulfilled lives. Anxiety awakens all our senses, making them alive to imminent threats, and prepares our reason to recognize in the facts of the present 'the signs of the end'. Without these abilities we would be like the people in Pompeii who didn't notice the eruption of Vesuvius or couldn't accept that it was happening. We would feel as safe as the people before the Flood, who in spite of a biblical warning did not see anything coming (Matt. 24.38-39). Humanity would long since have become extinct. An ethics of fear sees the crises; an ethics of hope perceives the chances in the crises. In the exuberance of hope, the temptation is utopianism; in fear, the temptation is alarmism.

In Ernst Bloch's *Principle of Hope*, we find the foundation for an ethics of change; in *The Imperative of Responsibility*, Hans Jonas gives us an ethics of fear.<sup>3</sup> The hope for what can come is replaced by the fear for what perhaps will no longer be. So it becomes more important to retain what is old than to attain the new. Hans Jonas therefore maintained that the prediction of the bad takes precedence over the prediction of the good: 'It is the rule, to put it in primitive terms, that the prophecy of disaster has to be listened to more attentively than the prophecy of salvation.' For him, general anxiety about the continued existence of humanity is the foundation for the fear of the unforeseeable consequences of human technology. He uses the alarm over humanity's threat to its own existence in order to ensure authentic human

being in the present. The 'heuristic of fear' awakens responsibility in the present. That is not pessimism any more than what Bloch disseminated was optimism. It is the reverse side of hope, although the two sides are not equal, since hope precedes fear: without hope there would be no fear, and without 'the prophecy of salvation' there would be no 'prophecy of disaster'.

In Jewish and Christian apocalyptic, the endtime is announced with every conceivable catastrophe scenario, but at the same time deliverance in the new divine beginning is proclaimed all the more intensively. In the catastrophes of the endtime, nothing less than God's Spirit itself will be poured out, so that everything mortal may live (Joel 2.28-32; Acts 2.16-21). With the outpouring of the divine Spirit of life, the new creation of all things begins in the downfall of the world. After 'the heavens pass away' and 'the earth is burnt up', on the Day of the Lord there will be 'a new earth on which righteousness dwells' (2 Peter 3.13).

Near and hard to grasp the God,  
But where there is danger deliverance also grows.

So wrote Friedrich Hölderlin in his Patmos Hymn.<sup>4</sup> The Christian ethics of hope is called to life through the recollection of the raising of the crucified Christ and therefore expects the dawn of God's new world in the passing away of the old one (Rev. 21.1). The endtime is simultaneously the new-time. In the perils of time it lives from hope for the coming of God. It mobilizes energies out of surmounted fears. It holds instructions for resistance against the old world in anticipation of the new one. It presupposes a transformative eschatology and, correspondingly, is itself transforming action. It is this unity of messianic awareness of the time and transformative action that is meant in Romans 13.12:

The night is far gone,  
the day is at hand.  
Let us then cast off the works of darkness  
and put on the armour of light.

Christian hope is founded on Christ's resurrection and opens up a life in the light of God's new world. Christian ethics anticipates the universal coming of God in the potentialities of history.

## Praying and Watching

All Christian action is embedded in a particular spirituality. In the Benedictine tradition, this spirituality is *ora et labora*, pray and work. Prayer is directed towards God, work towards the world. But through prayer work in the world is seen *sub specie aeternitatis*, in the light of eternity, and is brought before the face of God. In other words, it is answerable to God. Consequently, it is not a pious irrelevance if we begin our daily work, or any special project, with a prayer.

What does hope add to prayer? I think what it adds is 'watching'.<sup>5</sup> In Christian life according to the New Testament, the call to prayer is always linked with the messianic wake-up call to watch. In the night of God in the Garden of Gethsemane, when the disciples are sunk into the deep sleep of hopelessness, Jesus does not ask them, 'Could you not pray with me' but 'Could you not watch with me one hour?' (Mark 14.37), and he warns them: 'Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation.' Specifically, Christian prayer is always linked with expectation for what is to come, whether it be out of fear of evil and catastrophes or out of hope for the kingdom of God. Watching awakens all our senses for what is to come. Watching and being sober, watching and expecting, watching and being open-eyed, go together in the messianic hope.<sup>6</sup>

In watching we open our eyes and 'recognize' the hidden Christ who waits for us in the poor, the sick, the weary and heavy-laden (Matt. 25.37). In the faces of the poor, we 'see' the face of the crucified God. Today the messianic awakening for God's future is often translated into sensibility for the little things in everyday life. That makes it more realistic but also weaker. Attentiveness in the messianic awakening surely lies in attentiveness for the signs of the times, in which God's future is heralded, so that Christian action, inspired by hope, becomes the anticipation of the coming kingdom in which righteousness and peace kiss each other. So Christian action is accompanied by prayer and watching, by the trust of the heart, by wide open eyes, and by attentive senses.

## Waiting and Hastening

Out of hope for God's future, all theologians of hope from Comenius to Blumhardt have praised these two attitudes towards life: Christoph Blumhardt called them *warten und pressieren* 'waiting and being in a hurry'. It is the Second Letter of Peter (3.12) which tells Christians they should be 'waiting for and hastening the coming of the Lord's future'. By this he means the new earth 'on which righteousness dwells'.

Waiting and hastening: that sounds like a contradiction. If we are waiting, then what we are waiting for is not yet there. If we are hastening, then what we have waited for is already in sight. These are the two extremes between which attitudes towards the future are played out. As boundary marks they do not have to be mutually contradictory. Let us translate 'waiting and hastening' into our own language and experience:

*Waiting:* that doesn't mean a passive waiting-it-out; it means an active expectation. A passage in the prophet Isaiah offers an apt example of the difference. When they are in exile and far from home, the prisoners come to the prophet and ask, 'Watchman, what of the night?'—and he replies: 'Morning is coming, but it is still night. If you will enquire, come back again' (21.11-12). The apostle Paul picks up this image about the night and proclaims the dawn of God's day in the light of Christ's resurrection: 'The night is far gone, the day is at hand' (Rom. 13.12). So waiting turns into expectation, and the dreams of the night become an awakening in the daybreak colours of the new day. The eclipse of God becomes the sunrise of God. As Paul, in his ethic of hope, calls for the 'weapons of light', so the awakening of hope carries the promised future of righteousness into one's own life. God's coming unfolds a transforming power in the present. In our tense expectation we are prepared for God's future, and that future acquires power in our present.

The ability to wait also means not conforming to the conditions of this world of injustice and violence. People who expect God's justice and righteousness no longer accept the so-called normative force of what is fact, because they know that a better world is possible and that changes in the present are necessary. Being able to wait means resisting the threats and seductions of the present, not letting oneself be brought into line, and not conforming.

The ability to wait means not giving oneself up, not capitulating, either before the supremacy of the powers of this world or before one's own helplessness, but living with head held high. The 'upright walk' Kant commends is deserving of every respect. It is the heroic stance of the unbowed back of the free. But 'the head held high' is a result of the approaching redemption (Luke 21.28).

The ability to wait is faithfulness in faith. Hope does not give faith only wings, as we say; it gives faith also the power to stand firm and to endure to the end. That is the famed 'perseverance of the saints' (*perservantia sanctorum*) to which Calvin and the Huguenots held fast. 'O Lord our God, other lords besides thee have ruled over us, but thy name alone we acknowledge'

(Isa. 26.13). For the resistance of the Confessing Church in Nazi Germany after 1933, these words were of vital importance.<sup>7</sup> The Huguenot Christian Marie Durand endured thirty-six years of captivity in the Tour de la constance in Aigues-Mortes and scratched her famous *resistez* on the door instead of denying her faith and so regaining her freedom.

*Hastening*: To hasten is really to go swiftly in space from one place to another. To hasten 'towards the future' transfers this movement from space into the time of history. The present becomes the transition from what has been to what will be, to the future. To 'hasten' in time means crossing the frontiers of present reality into the spheres of what is possible in the future. In crossing these frontiers we anticipate the future for which we hope. With every doing of the right, we prepare the way for the 'new earth' on which righteousness will 'dwell'. If we achieve some justice for those who are suffering violence, then God's future shines into their world. If we take up the cause of 'widows and orphans', a fragment of life comes into our own life. The earth is groaning under the unjust violence with which we are exploiting its resources and energies. We are 'hastening' towards the Lord's future when we anticipate the righteousness and justice out of which, on the Day of the Lord, a new and enduring earth is to come into being. Not to take things as they are but to see them as they can be in that future, and to bring about this 'can be' in the present, means living up to the future. So looking forward, perceiving possibilities and anticipating what will be tomorrow are fundamental concepts of an ethics of hope. Today 'waiting and hastening towards the Lord's future' means *resisting and anticipating*.