Hoping against Hope?

A Biblical Perspective

1. Prolegomena

The word 'hope' implies at the very least some unease and anxiety about the future. It often, if not always, implies some unease, discomfort, difficulty, threat in the present time. And therefore, 'hope' is not an abstract subject; it relates to the hopes and fears of people in the here and now as well as about the future. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that the subject of hope seems never to leave us; time and again it resurfaces. In the Cold War years the 1954 Evanston Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) was on the theme "Christ the Hope of the world". In 1968 when the world was facing threats to peace, youth and student unrest, disturbances resulting from racial and social injustices and the jaundiced world economic development, all of which impinge on hope, the same WCC's Uppsala Assembly was on the theme "Behold, I Make All Things New". And, of course, in an assembly of students of theology, one hardly needs to mention Jurgen Moltmann's classic and celebrated study, Theology of Hope.

All the examples thus far are from religious dimensions of life and society. In the secular world there are today institutions and movements that in not so many words express or symbolize the anxiety for the present and the desire for hope. The United Nations Organisation, for all its weaknesses and failures, represents the search for hope that there may never again, be repeated the folly that produced the two Great World Wars, and the unexampled terror of atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) represents the hope that there may be food for all in the one world which God has created. Movements like the feminist movements, racial equality movements, etc., represent the search for hope for peoples who are presently marginalized and oppressed because of their gender, race, tribe, creed, etc. Their methods may be questionable; but they represent the quest after hope for otherwise threatened and embattled people in a bleak landscape. To denigrate and denounce them as "terrorists and primitive" is to miss the real point of such movements.

Therefore, we are unable to leave out of our gaze the subject of hope, despite and perhaps more so, because of all the threats to our well-being and security. But what are those threats that push us into looking for hope, when we are in hopeless situations? What is the context in which we believers claim to preach the gospel of hope and the God of hope? And is it really good news and relevant good news that we preach to people who are embattled one way or another and are tempted to give us hope? Let me here attempt to paint a selective panoramic picture of the world today and as we approach the next millennium.
2. Context for Preaching the God of Hope

(i) Age of Science and Technology

In this century, in particular, the world has seen the stupendous achievements for science and technology. It has brought about a communications revolution which inter alia caused the world to shrink. It has put people into space and made it possible to see more of the heavens or starry heights. It has turned deserts into good arable soil to sustain populations and give hope to peoples otherwise without hope. With science and technology there is the potential and possibility to tackle those problems that for centuries eclipsed the hope of peoples. Science and technology in one sense are a hope of the world.

As a Christian I am committed to the view that science and technology are a legitimate pre-occupation because, as scripture puts it, "be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it" (Genesis 1:28). The right to "subdue" the earth includes the pursuit of science and technology for the benefit of the world, particularly for a better quality of life for humanity. In that rudimentary sense, the proclamation that the Creator God has been associated with, if not is in, the scientific-technological achievements in so far as they are conducive to a better life and tomorrow is good news of hope.

However, the right to pursue science and technology, as Christians believe, was no carte blanche. It was to be under God i.e. informed by the purposes of God and to be conducive to the well-being of the world. It is here that we meet the ambivalence of science and technology. For while on the one hand, it has produced tremendous and beneficial things for the world, it has also put it in bondage, raising problems and difficulties that threaten humanity and the world. The invention of the atomic bomb changed the course of human conflict. In the name of deterence, more and more deadly weapons are researched and manufactured year in, year out and yet we do not seem to feel any more secure than before. Despite the positive steps of Reagan-Gorbachev summit in December 1986, the world continues to stand under darkening clouds of horrendous, nuclear holocaust, nuclear accidents such as Chernobyl disaster of 1986 and nuclear and other industrial waste whose radio-active and other substances threaten humanity with death and disease and pollution. Conventional weapons are used to kill and create refugees who have no hope and become a time-bomb of discontent, and violent resistance. Industries are putting into the atmosphere dangerous quantities of zink and lead which are injurious to human health. The ecological imbalance and the lowering of the ozone layer, in part the result of the success of science and technology, face the world with the disastrous and hope-dimming, if not hope-blotting, consequences of acid rain, desertification, droughts, deaths and economic refugees, in short, a general sense of hopelessness. We can also thank God for Computer Science with the aid of which we are now able to forecase the future. But our frustration is increased because futurology has a record of failure too; despite and in spite of computer science and futurology, surprises and unpredictability haunt us, inducing in the process some sense of hopelessness and fatalism. Let us not forget the frightening truth that the success of science and technology has also introduced false appetites and values and development plans which threaten the balance of nature, with threatening consequences for human beings. A Kenyan, Hilary