

Openness to the future makes hope invaluable; it also makes it unreliable



I'm of an age where my friends and peers have reached that stage of our progression to the grave commonly termed "settling down". Erstwhile young bravos are tentatively investigating upholstery and kitchen goods. Formerly footloose artists are sizing up mortgage contracts. Red-hot revolutionaries are stealing sheepish glances at pram catalogues. The ongoing collapse of print journalism is likely to spare me from the gadarene stampede towards propriety – but no man is an island.

In that spirit, I was surprised to find that several of my friends were strongly considering adopting children rather than bearing their own. Their reasoning – shared by a surprising number of young people – is that the ongoing implosion of our planet's ecology makes bringing new life into the world questionably ethical.

Controversial conclusions, but not baseless ones. Arable land, raw materials, freshwater, fertiliser, fish – all are being depleted faster than they can be replaced. The "developed world" is expending resources at a rate that would require three planets to sustain. And our grim present will likely be followed by a bleak future. For the last 60 years, every decade has been warmer than the last.

But human beings have raised children in the worst of circumstances before. Having kids in the midst of wars, plagues and natural disasters is probably the norm as far as human history is concerned. The future might be dark – but not having children doesn't make it any brighter. Or greener.

Overconsumption – not overpopulation – is the rotten tap root of the climate crisis. Pope Francis is right to insist that indigenous peoples have a lot to teach us. Pre-colonial societies often combined high populations with sustainable ways of life. Contrary to the claims of contemporary eco-Jeremiahs, environmental ruin isn't an intrinsic quality of the human species.

But avoiding catastrophe now requires a dramatic and intentional change in how our civilisation functions. That such a change isn't, at present, happening isn't down to human stupidity or greed. Most people, at some level, accept change is necessary. Money, energy, resources – the technical means to change our way of life – we have these. But what we don't have is indispensable. We don't have hope.

How should Christians respond to all this? We can say that political alternatives ought to be found; that people should be re-evangelised. But these proposals only describe a hopeful future; they don't outline what it would take to get us there. It's easy to understand that we need hope. It's more difficult to work out what that means in practice.

Hope tends to be like that; slippery, contrary, even mischievous. In his poem, "Hope", George Herbert describes offering a variety of useful or hard-won objects to the figure of Hope – only for Hope to give him richly symbolic but completely impractical items in return. Openness to the future makes hope invaluable: it also makes it unreliable.

This unreliability can be hard to accept if you instinctively see human life as instrumental, about enforcing order on chaos – about control. In politics, in religion, in our interpersonal relationships, we naturally look to shape and direct – not to let go and to let be.

It's not possible to control everything, of course – which is why our contemporary obsession with control concludes in – and feeds on – despair. Both tendencies are, in some ways, attractive – because both are grounded in refusal; a refusal to trust, to be vulnerable, to be changed. Having hope, on the other hand, opens us up to tragedy: the very thing our collective control-freakery is expected to preclude.

So recovering hope in the future might rest, counter-intuitively, in recognising we can't control it. Building a sustainable relationship with the natural world requires a recognition that we can't bend nature to human desires – and we shouldn't try to. And rather than look to children for what they can do for us – as expressions or reflections of adult concerns – perhaps we should consider that children might be important precisely because they don't do anything.

Children are absolutely dependent; absolutely vulnerable. They exist only in order to exist. Doing so, they illuminate something fundamental to the rest of us: that Creation is a gift, not an instrument. That insight might not be sufficient to bring hope to a hopeless age. But it's not a bad place to begin.



Madoc Cairns is a graduate student at Oriel College, University of Oxford.