

29th Sunday Ordinary Time, Year A

The Reading from Paul for today's Mass is taken from the opening words of his First Letter written from Corinth in 50AD to the Christian community in the Macedonian port city of Thessalonica. Paul congratulates the community on the way they are 'showing their faith in action, are working for love and persevering through hope'. This is the first of many occasions in which faith, hope and love are mentioned in the one breath. Perhaps the most well known is Paul's statement to the Corinthians: 'Faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love'(1Cor 13:13). These are called 'theological virtues' because, as the Catholic Catechism explains (n.1812): 'They relate directly to God, disposing us to live in a relationship with the Holy Trinity'.

We often reflect on faith and we are always speaking of love. I wonder how often we take time to reflect on the Christian virtue of hope? The word 'hope' conjures up all the things we hope for, for ourselves and for those we love, and, ultimately our hope that one day we will enjoy the presence of God for all eternity in heaven.

It is true that the virtue of hope is about the future, but it is important, and perhaps surprising, to note that, while hope as a Christian virtue does concern the future, its focus is very much on the present. It is good to long with expectation for future happiness, but it is also true that such longing can distract us from the reality of the present moment. By the virtue of hope, we entrust the future peacefully to God and confidently leave it in God's hands, knowing that he who loves us will certainly continue to do so in the future. Our faith in God assures us that God wants for each of us what Jeremiah calls: 'a future full of hope'(Jeremiah 29:11). A perfect example of hope is found in Psalm 131: 'O Lord, my heart is not lifted up in proud, my eyes are not raised too high. I do not occupy myself with great and wondrous matters that are beyond me. No, I hold myself in quiet and silence, like a little child with its mother, like the little child that is with me, so is my soul. O Israel, hope in the Lord, from this time on and forevermore'.

A baby resting in the arms of its mother or father is not anxious about the future, nor is it excitedly looking forward to it. It is content. That is our model for hope. We adults cannot but think of the future. If we truly hope in God, however, we can be like that child. We need not be anxious about it, or distracted from the present by it, but we can entrust it to God, knowing how faithful God is to love. This frees us to focus on the present, even if our present is painful. When we place our hope in God we still the fears that are stirred up when our imagination goes wild, thinking up all the worst possible things that could happen to us.

We have to remind ourselves that there is no such reality as the future. What we think of as future is only real when it is actually present. Prior to that it is nothing more than a figment of our imagination. It fills us with dread at times because we do not have the strength to cope with it, nor do we have the grace. The reason is that it is not present

and so not real. If ever it becomes real, then we will have the grace and the strength to bear it, but not now. Paul assures us: 'No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it'(1Corinthians 10:13). 'Hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us'(Romans 5:5). God has poured his Spirit into our hearts, and God will continue to do so. When we are afraid of the future, we are to call this truth to mind, and, like the child in its mother's arm, place our trust in God and still our hearts. We are then free to focus on the grace of the present moment and give all our energies to receiving and giving love now as best we can. God loves us. Everything is to be seen in that light. Paul tells us that nothing else really matters except that we learn to love, and John of the Cross reminds us that: 'At the evening of life, we shall be judged on our love'.

The Prayer of today's Mass reads: 'Lord our God, Father of all, you guard us under the shadow of your wings (see also the Entrance Antiphon) and search into the depths of our hearts. Remove the blindness that cannot know you and relieve the fear that would hide us from your sight'.

So let us look carefully at our lives, to check the direction in which we are headed. We are being reminded to check our ambitions. What are my hopes for myself, for my family? Am I being caught up in ambitions that are really just distractions from what really matters? Are my hopes helping or harming my relationships? Am I so anxious about the future or so distracted by my dreaming about it that I am not really focusing on the only life I have - which is the life of the present moment?

Thinking of God's love we can entrust the future to him. Thinking of Jesus' courage, we can face the present, whatever its pain, in trust, knowing that the best way to help our future is to live the present moment as well as we can. Let us long for the eternal communion with God that is heaven. We are made for that and our hearts remain restless till we enjoy it. But this longing must not distract us from living now as truthfully and lovingly as we can, while remaining open to God's grace. The one for whom we long is with us now, and at the end of our life he will take us as his very dear children into his eternal embrace. May this sure hope give us the courage we need to concentrate now on living a life of love.

If you are finding it hard to hope, because of the sorrow in your life, may I suggest that you read Chapter Three of the Book of Lamentations (3:17-24).The author describes his suffering in moving and graphic imagery and concludes with the words: 'My soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is. I say, 'Gone is my glory, and all that I had hoped for from the Lord.'... My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me. But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. 'The Lord is my portion,' says my soul, 'therefore I will hope in him.'

We cannot speak lightly of suffering. But many who have suffered much assure us that there are special flowers that grow only in the garden of suffering. Abbé Pierre, a French priest who gave his life to helping the suffering, saw love and suffering as sharing in the dance of life: 'Suffering says to love: Do not leave me, you who have called for me. I know that without you I would turn back and become, once again, something ugly. Tell me that you will never leave me. I am afraid to find myself alone. Love replies: Do not be afraid. Perhaps you fail to realise that with you I become more beautiful, though people find this hard to imagine and believe. yes, my beloved Suffering, I love you because you complete my beauty and because you alone know how to bring love to perfection, full of light and joy'.