

32nd Sunday of the Year, Year C

In light of the readings chosen for today's Mass, I would like to reflect with you on the central importance of hope in our lives. The word hope immediately brings to mind the future and 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. This is expressed beautifully in the final words of today's Responsorial Psalm. In spite of his suffering, the author trusts in God. He gives expression to his ultimate hope: 'I shall see your face and be filled when I awake with the sight of your glory'(Psalm 17:15).

It is important to note, however, that, while the word hope in the New Testament obviously concerns the future, its primary focus is not on the future but 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. The future only becomes real when it is present and the best preparation for the future is to live the present well. By the virtue of hope, we entrust the future peacefully to God and leave it in God's hands, knowing that God who loves us now will certainly continue to do so. It is this that holds out for us the promise of what the prophet Jeremiah calls 'a future full of hope'(Jeremiah 29:11). Psalm 131 is a psalm of present trust in God: 'O Lord, my heart is not lifted up in pride, 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.'

With this statement of trust, the psalmist concludes: 'O Israel, hope in the Lord, from this time on and forevermore'. If we trust now we can leave the future to God, our loving Mother. A baby that is contently resting in its mother's arms is not concerned for the future. We adults cannot but think of the future. If we truly hope in God, however, we can be like that child. Confident in God's love for us now, we are free to attend to God's grace inspiring us how best to respond to the present, and to love now as best we can. Of course we can look forward to a future full of love. The virtue of hope, however, enables us to entrust the future to God and to leave it peacefully in God's hands.

Our faith explains why we have every reason for such a trust, for it assures us of God's love, it reminds us of how Jesus' hope was vindicated when his Father raised him to life, and it focuses our attention on the presence in our lives now of the Spirit of God. Paul writes: '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).

The virtue of hope enables us to trust that God will continue to love us and our world, and so we can hope that, in spite of the awful effects of people's sinful rejection of God, God's grace will ultimately prevail. We hope now to be saved from evil and to continue in God's grace and we hope that light will conquer darkness, and especially that we will have the courage to let God's light enlighten us so that we do not add to the darkness. As John writes in his First Letter: 'All who have this hope in God purify themselves, just as he is pure'(1John 3:3).

We remind ourselves that God has given us life, and that if we do not reject it God will continue to offer it to us for all eternity. Death, in other words, is but the horizon of our present vision and, if we live in communion with God, death will be for us and for those we love the entry into

an eternity of communion with God and with all who love God. Saint Peter speaks of 'an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for us'(1Peter 1:4). And Saint Paul speaks of 'what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him'(1Corinthians 2:9). In the Apocalypse we read: 'He will wipe every tear from our eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more'(Revelation 21:4).

Because of the resurrection of Jesus, we hope that we too will enjoy an eternity of love with our risen bodies. We cannot imagine what this will be like, but our faith is that all that we are as a human person will somehow, marvellously, be renewed by God in heaven and that the bodies we now have will be transformed just as happened to Jesus (see Philippians 3:21).

Traditionally, the Jews, like their neighbours, assumed that when we die we go to the underworld, where we exist in a form that is shadowy and lifeless. This is the opinion espoused by the Sadducees in today's Gospel. The martyrdom of so many heroic and faithful people during the persecutions which took place in the second century before Christ under the Syrian king Antiochus IV led many to believe in life after death. It seemed impossible that God would not reward with life those who gave their lives so heroically for their faith. Today's First Reading (2Maccabees 7) comes from that period and is among the earliest explicit statements concerning the resurrection of the body (see also Daniel 12:1-2). The Sadducees are trying to make fun of Jesus but he knows that God who gives life will never take it away: he is 'the God not of the dead but of the living'.

So what does this mean for us? The Church in today's readings is asking us to look carefully at our lives, to check the direction in which we are heading. 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 we allowing the idols of our culture to take possession of our hearts? 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?

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'.

Let us conclude with the prayer with which Saint Paul ends today's Second Reading: 'May the Lord turn your hearts towards God's love and the fortitude of Jesus'(2Thessalonians 3:5). Thinking of God's love we can entrust the future to God. Thinking of Jesus' courage, we can face the present, in trust whatever its pain, 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.