

Second Sunday of Advent reflection by Connecticut Chaplain Rev. Gauthier Vincent, ChDD

Of all the Scripture readings that we will hear during this Advent, Isaiah 11 (our first reading on this 2nd Sunday of Advent) perhaps best captures the spirit of the Season: *“A shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse, and from his roots a bud shall blossom.... Then the wolf shall be a guest of the lamb, the calf and the young lion shall browse together, with a little child to guide them.”* As we listen to the familiar words and rhythms, like every year prior and every year future, we feel the same stirring within of souls, like an echo from a world to come but already known, unknown but familiar somehow. Hope is the name of that familiar stirring.

What is hope? The spiritual writer Ronald Rolheiser suggests that “hope is no wish and no mood¹.” Wishful thinking, he explains, like: ‘I wish I were 6’4, or ‘I wish I were younger,’ has no grounding in reality: It is pure fantasy. This is not what hope is. Optimism on the other hand is a matter of temperament. Optimism is no better than pessimism: Both are ways to escape reality. This is not what hope is either.

So what is hope? Hope is an intuitive, experiential, revealed knowledge that at the end (whenever the end might be) “all shall be well in all manner of thing” as Julian of Norwich wrote². At the end, somehow, the “lion and the lamb will rest together.” Hope is no more grounded in wishful thinking, dreams, moods and emotions than it is in a rational assessment of our own talents and assets and our capacity to bring about a better world. Hope is not grounded in a better understanding of history either. Hope, Rolheiser explains, is grounded in God’s promise; hope stands on God’s Word alone. The Prophets, Jesus, the apostles and countless saints after them, all spoke of God’s promise to bring us to our true home where Christ will be born in our hearts, and all will be well. At the end, hope, God’s promise, is grounded in God’s own inexhaustible being: God is always creating something new, and in God’s infinite patience and mercy, God is always coming up with new ideas, new plans, new opportunities, new ways to bring the threads of our lives together, and new ways to redeem our human history. Indeed, God will have the last word in our lives and in the life of the world and “all will be well in all manner of thing.”

Where can I find hope? The Church has taught that hope is one of the three theological virtues. As such, it is a gift from God that is also the gift of God’s presence in us. So one does not arrive at hope through one’s own deductive reasoning or positive thinking. Rather, one is given hope and one receives or rejects the gift. I went to confession once and I explained to the priest that I was prone to despair: “I am sorry, I said, I am not much of a hopeful man.” The old priest replied without missing a beat: “It’s easy, just ask God for the gift of hope; God cannot refuse to the gift of Godself to you.” So we just need to ask for hope and hope is given us: Hope is God hugging us and our hugging God. God never says no to a hug.

John the Baptist was a man of hope. He wasted his time in the desert and dressed in rags because he did not want to do his own things and rely on his own strength; rather, he chose to bet his existence on God’s Providence. In essence, he chose to live in hope. Hope was certainly not the assurance that his life would end well (getting one’s head served on a platter is not the best of deaths). But hope was the assurance that his life would be meaningful because it would be caught within a bigger life and a bigger story than his. John knew, and he teaches us today, that in God’s heart, everything works for good, everything belongs, and every tree bears fruits. With God, nothing goes to waste. To know that simple truth and to bet one’s life on it, is to live in hope.

We, knights and dames of Malta, are called to hope. Through the centuries, our forebears sacrificed their lives to defend the Catholic Faith and protect the poor because they were people of hope. Like John the Baptist, our patron saint, they dared take all the risks, even the risk of failure and death, because they had chosen hope. Today we must walk in their footsteps and imitate them. We must also heed John’s call to repentance. Many of us have learned to rely on our own talents and assets and we have achieved worldly success doing it. All good for a time. But now may be a new time, a time to unlearn what made us successful and live the rest of our lives as if we were only poor, humble, little knights and dames, whose only real talent is to choose hope and follow their King down whatever rough, dusty road the King calls them to.

To conclude, a few lines that I learned many years ago, from the French Catholic poet Charles Peguy.³ Poorly translated into English, they go like this:

*How strong is my grace, and the power of my grace, for this little flame, Hope,
Shivering in the cold winds of the world, anxious, fragile, buffeted by all kinds of sin,*

¹ Ronald Rolheiser, *Wrestling with God*, 2018

² Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*

³ Charles Peguy, *La Petite Esperance, Le Porche du Mystère de la Deuxième Vertu*, 1912

Almost going out...

*Still she holds bright and pure, though she trembles,
Little light in the sanctuary, burning always, though surrounded by darkness, fragile,
Little flame that has seen through the thickness of worlds, and ages, and nights*

*Hope, says God, is what surprises me.
I can't get over it.
A poor, little girl, she does look like much,
This little daughter of mine,
Immortal though....*

As we move through Advent and toward Christmas, we kneel in reverent silence, as good knights and dames do, their swords and good works laid on the ground beside them (as in a little chapel at night) and we wait for our Gentle King to be born again in the stable of our poor hearts and the wild hay of the world. Holding on to Hope, like a little flame in our hands, we await His coming in glory.