

A Sermon for the Second Sunday in Advent, December 12, 2006

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Today's lesson provides a meditation on the cardinal virtue of hope. The epistle (Rom. 15:4-13) begins, "Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope." The epistle ends, "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope."

What is hope? One source (dictionary.com) defines hope as "the feeling that what is wanted can be had or that events will turn out for the best." As an alternative definition it offers, "to look forward to with desire and reasonable confidence."

Neither of these is Christian hope because, as positive as they sound, there is an element of doubt. My feeling that things will turn out for the best may turn out to be in error. I may have a reasonable, but false, confidence.

The Christian hope is the absolute assurance that God will do what he has promised to do. He has proclaimed the Christian hope in his Word. He has bound himself by it. It will happen whether or not we, personally, believe it or feel good about it. As Jesus said in our gospel (Luke 21:25f.). "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away."

Hope is integrally related to truth. Our hope of resurrection is sure and certain because it is true. One characteristic fault of our age is the desire to feel good about things regardless of whether or not they are true. This is the root of false religion. It offers us something we want but it bases that hope on a false premise.

For example, the suicide bomber kills himself (and others) because he hopes to get seventy virgins in the next life and hopes that his act will gain other rewards as well. However, as one man I know said, "Boy, will he be surprised!" The main problem with his act is not that it is destructive and hideous; the main problem is that it is based on a false hope. It is not true. His hope will not be fulfilled.

The same dynamic prevails in more innocuous systems of belief. People are promised pathways to heaven based on false teachings. Like a bad map that says there is a road from city A to city B where, in fact, there is none, false systems of belief promise things they can't deliver. They give false hope.

One reason we shy away from the truth is that it often makes us feel bad before it makes us feel good. When we do something wrong, we feel guilty. The first impulse is to run away from God to avoid the confrontation, the bad feeling. But if we are willing to face the painful truth, confess our sins and ask God to forgive us, the result is that we experience peace. Facing the truth leads us, ultimately, to feel better. But trying to feel better does not necessarily lead us to the truth.

We know something is true because it has been revealed to us through Jesus Christ. We know the revelation of Jesus Christ through the Bible. We know how to interpret the Bible because the Holy

Spirit has led the church into a common, catholic understanding of it for two thousand years—“that through patience and comfort of the Scriptures we might have hope.”

Why do we believe we are forgiven? Because the Scripture says, “If any man sin we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous, and he is the propitiation for our sins.” Why do we believe that in the future our bodies will be raised from the dead and we will be set free from sin? Because Jesus said, “This is the will of my Father, that every one who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day.” The Christian hope is based on the promise of God. This is why it is certain that what we hope for will come to pass.

The Christian hope literally lives within us in the person of the Holy Spirit. As Romans says, “Hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us” (5:5).

Because of the gift of the Spirit, the Christian hope is not merely a cognitive belief that God will do what he has promised. It is a desire in the soul for the fulfillment of God’s promise. Now we struggle with sin and make progress by the grace of God. But in that redemptive activity there is a longing for completion. The Holy Spirit within us cries out, When will I be free from sin? When will I get my new body? When will I see God face to face? As Romans says, “We who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for the adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (8:23).

Today is called Bible Sunday because of the references to the Bible in the day’s collect and lessons. We have the sure and certain hope of resurrection because we believe the biblical message. It is essential that we read the Bible as a habit of life so that we will be continually strengthened with the Christian hope and not carried away with the current fad or what may feel better to us at the time.

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