

An Advent Sermon



Of the three theological virtues—faith, hope and charity—hope is the virtue that most characterizes Advent. Faith is the virtue we might associate in particular with Easter. Faith believes that victory is hidden in the cross that awaits the end of the path of Holy Week; faith believes that God has triumphed over death by bringing the crucified Christ to new life, the resurrection life of Jesus we share in through faith; Charity, or love, we associate easily with Christmas; Christmas is the time when we give gifts to others in honor of the Great Gift God has given to us by sending his Son as a child in a manger; Christmas is the feast of the incarnation, the time when God is literally most human.

Hope, on the other hand, is the neglected middle child of the virtues, neither the heroic virtue of faith that overcomes all doubts, nor the easily sentimentalized virtue of love about which songs are sung that make us feel all warm inside. In the words of John Lennon's Beatles tune: "All you need is love. Love is all you really need." So also, Advent is that season with which we often don't quite know what to do. Advent is sort of latched onto Christmas by default. Advent is the season of Hope because it is the season of anticipation. During Advent, we anticipate the season of Christmas in which God comes among us as the infant in Mary's arms. But let's face it. Advent wreaths are nice; they can't compare to Christmas trees.

Then again, there is another side to Advent, that side of Advent that looks not toward the birth of Jesus—an anticipation that is really a remembering, a looking back to a

time in the past—but that side that looks forward to the return of Jesus. This is one of those articles in the Creed that perhaps makes us just a little bit uncomfortable. We associate awaiting the second coming of Christ with quaint nineteenth-century people who calculated detailed dates of Jesus' return, who dressed in white robes and waited on roof tops, only to have to go home disappointed the next morning. Perhaps you've heard of William Miller, the Baptist preacher from Vermont who preached for twenty-five years that Jesus would return in March 1843, then March 1844, then October 22, 1844. There were a lot of disappointed people on October 23, 1844.

We fear that hope too easily verges on fanaticism, so we bide our time to wait and see. We may not be jaded cynics, but we're not throwing caution to the winds, either. A little hope is okay, perhaps hope for the immediate future. Let's hope that the Republicans can get enough votes next time to take back the Congress, or that the Democrats can solidify enough support so they can keep it. Cosmic hope, hope that everything will someday turn out—that may be more than we're ready for.

In some ways, we are perhaps much like the nation of Israel in its infancy. In the early days of the nation of Israel, hope was directed toward the immediate future. When Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, they seem to have had one immediate hope, deliverance from the bondage of Egypt. After God delivered Israel from bondage, the hope was that God would lead his people to the Promised Land, and make them secure in the land. Once they were in the land, however, Israel's threats did not disappear; the nation continued to have threats from without and within. From without, Israel's neighbors threatened constantly to overrun and conquer the nation. From within, there was always the danger of abandoning the distinct nature of Israel's faith and of assimilating to the practices of the surrounding peoples. And, of course, Israel faced the same kind of domestic problems we face today.

The strong and wealthy took advantage of the weak and poor; Israel was ruled by a series of kings, who were sometimes good but often only made things worse.

As Israel's all-too-ordinary leaders continued to shatter the hopes of the people, an interesting thing happened. The hope that was originally grounded in ordinary political rulers, kings like David or his descendants, did not fade; instead it began to expand to become a hope about an unheard of kind of Davidic ruler, a political solution to the problem of inadequate political rulers that transcends politics. No ordinary king could do what the king described in this morning's readings from Isaiah 11 and Psalm 72 does. In time, Israel came to realize that nothing short of a complete remaking of the universe would do to satisfy shattered hopes; when hope is satisfied, the lion will lie down with the lamb, the child will play over the den of the poisonous asp and will not be hurt. The righteous descendant of David will be no longer a merely ordinary king, but an emissary who rules on behalf of God in an earthly paradise. Only the Creator could bring about such a reversal of the way things are.

Hope is oriented toward the future, and at the heart of Jesus' message were words about hope that pointed toward that future. The promise of the coming King who would be like David, but who was much more than David could ever have been, was implied in Jesus' proclamation that "The kingdom of God is at hand!" The words of the Beatitudes are so familiar to us that we may not notice that they point toward this future hope: the poor are blessed because theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven, but they are not blessed yet; those who mourn are blessed because they will be comforted; the meek are blessed because they will inherit the earth; those who hunger for righteousness will be filled; the merciful will receive mercy; the pure in heart will see God. Neither Jesus nor his followers saw these things happening right then and there, any more than we see them happening today. Nonetheless, Jesus was not merely preaching

pie in the sky by and by. Though Jesus looked forward to the future coming of God's kingdom, as did other Jews of his time, he also believed something radically different about this future; Jesus believed that in some way glimpses of this future kingdom of fulfilled hopes and reversed values were already present, already being anticipated in his own deeds and words. So he acted as if the poor and the meek were already blessed, he healed the sick, and he brought God's mercy to the sinners with whom he ate and drank, even as the future Davidic King was supposed to do.

After the death and resurrection of Jesus, the New Testament Church saw in him the righteous King like David who would fulfill Isaiah's prophecy. Insofar as it did so, it has left us with a profound ambiguity. It was certainly not evident to those who put Jesus to death that he was the fulfillment of Israel's dreams. The charge that was placed against him, that was nailed to his cross, was that he was the King of the Jews. But those who placed it there did so out of a sense of mockery. That the Church has continued to believe that the charge was in fact correct, that Jesus was and is and will be the King of the Jews, the righteous descendant of David, was founded on the belief that Jesus had overcome death. That death still seems to reign so often is a continual challenge to the assertion that Jesus is King; that Jesus is King is the church's affirmation that death will not have the last word. The Church has continued to exist only because it believes that Jesus' Kingship will not always be hidden, because it believes he will return and set all things right. Jesus offers present hope only because in the end he offers cosmic hope.

Christian hope is then an ambivalent virtue. Hope is not an immediate product of our experience; rather, hope contradicts what our experience now tells us. We don't now see the poor lifted up, the mournful comforted, or the meek in charge of the earth. Hope only operates when we are denied for the present that for which we long and dream. As long as we have

what we want, and life is well, we can afford to be indifferent about the future. If we hope about the future, we hope it will be much like today. It is only when the present is a threat that we think about a better future. We find, then, that we must choose between hope and despair. Hope is grounded in the assurance that eventually we will obtain what we lack now; despair is grounded in the fear that we will not.

Christian hope is not only ambivalent, it is not utopian. What do I mean by that? Hope is not simply a fulfillment of our this-worldly dreams. The future we hope for is not something conjured up or ushered in by human effort. There is a kind of political Christianity that equates Christian hope with the changing of political structures. The religious right and the so-called "politically correct" left do not differ radically in this regard. Of course, both are motivated by different images of the future. The religious right's image is motivated largely by fear and by judgment of those they perceive to be their own and therefore God's enemies. But their goal for society is frankly this-worldly. They want to return America to the way it was in the 1950's. The left has a very different kind of vision of the future, but their goal is also this-worldly. The goals of the left would be entirely achieved if only society could be completely restructured so that the oppressed were no longer oppressed. And the left's identifications of the oppressed are defined by the peculiarly class and social values of a particular affluent Western elite. Marx, I think, would not recognize the current left as embodying his social ideals. The problem with the hopes of both the left and the right is that they are not radical enough; that which they hope for cannot be achieved by political means.

Christian hope presupposes the fulfilling of a grander scheme than the restructuring of mere political realities. This is what Israel slowly realized when it began dreaming of a King who would rule over a world in which all things were made

right. Christian hope presupposes the remaking of the entire universe. A hope that is not cosmic cannot provide the kind of final satisfaction toward which hope pushes. Even if it were possible that our goals and dreams for ourselves and for society might someday be fulfilled, at the end of the road there would still be death, and death puts an end to all dreams and hopes. We cannot have hope for even our everyday dreams without the cosmic hope that eventually all is not futile, and that all will be well. When a mother tells her crying child that everything will be all right, she is offering the assurance of nothing less than a cosmic hope.

Nonetheless, cosmic hope does not mean fleeing from the world, giving up on the way things are. Rather, it is our hope for the future that leads to our dissatisfaction with the way things are now. It is only hope for an ultimate future that enables us to carry on from day to day, to try to make things different, if only in small ways. Though our plans and schemes for a better future for ourselves and for those we love are at most provisional, they are symptoms of that ultimate yearning without which we cannot live. Our bottomless wants are signs of a hunger that is not yet satisfied.

While cosmic hope is oriented toward the future of "someday," it is still grounded in the concrete reality of that which has happened in the past. Christian hope is grounded in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Our hope is in the God who raised Jesus from the dead. Because God is faithful to Jesus, we can trust him to be faithful to us. So we find that the hope of Advent is linked to the faith of Easter and the Charity of Christmas. Without hope, there can be no faith that the God who gave life to Jesus will be true to his promises and give life to us. Without faith, we cannot hope that those promises will be fulfilled. In hope, we trust one day to experience in full the love we glimpse in the manger of Bethlehem. Because in some way we have come to know this love made incarnate among us, we can hope that it will not be

merely a pipedream.

Finally, just as Christian hope is grounded in the concrete events of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, so it finds its expression in concrete ways, whenever we wish and dream that things were different, wherever we work at even the smallest day-to-day tasks, and not least in the concrete reality of Christian communities where we worship the God of hope each Sunday morning. The local church is the community that lives out its life in anticipation of that future that God has planned for all the human race. Hope gives us the courage to trust in the God who meets us in a crucified and yet risen King. May we experience for ourselves the reality of St. Paul's blessing in this morning's epistle: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." (Rom. 15:13). Amen.