

Hope

(From the Collect & Epistle: *Romans xv:4-13*)

The Collect: “Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant that we may in such wise hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience, and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen”

Romans 15:4 For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope...**13** Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing , that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost.

Hope is among the loveliest of words. How does one possibly pin down it down to a definition? The word is only four letters long, but very big nonetheless, containing within itself the longings, dreams, and expectations of all of us. It takes us beyond the ordinariness, and trouble, and confusion of the present to a far, far better place which we desperately await. It is the one handhold that survives in a sea of trouble.

It is also an Advent word, a Christmas word, for Jesus Christ came the first time as the fulfillment of the hope of His people. And He will come again, the “blessed hope” of the Church (Titus 2:13). This entire season is filled with the music and light of hope, and how delightful they are, even to eyes and ears that have no faith at all.

But the hopes of mankind have been placed in many, many things that have proven to be enormous disappointments. Many still hope, for example, that somehow the world will come to its senses and banish all war and evil, even after a host of bitter lessons have proven otherwise. Nations and civilizations have surrendered themselves to charismatic leaders promising great things, who have proven rather to be brutal oppressors. The world has been engulfed by philosophies and belief systems offering a path to utopia but instead delivering death and defeat. As a result, many no longer dare to hope or believe in anything. They have surrendered themselves to cynicism and self-indulgence.

On a personal level, as well, our hopes are put everywhere. Some of these prove true, and more than fulfill our expectations. Others fall through, and we are left with disillusionment. It could be in a medical procedure, or a financial scheme, or in just pure luck. Hope, after all, is an attitude of heart available to anyone in any circumstance. But its strength and validity is based upon what it is founded in. All the remedies that men can offer to any and all of the ills that beset us cannot be guaranteed. There is something about the nature of life on this planet that informs us, if we are willing to accept it, that we dare not trust ourselves entirely to anything other than what we can, with full certainty and all confidence, place our hopes safely and completely in.

This is why today's Collect and Epistle are of such exceeding importance. They speak of hope that is certified to be fulfilled, because it is based upon God's own Word. It will never let us down, though our lives be littered with disappointment and failure.

Why is our hope in God so sure and unique? Let me offer a few reasons. First, it is a hope that has been tested by the example of numerous lives that have been pushed to the maximum by their circumstances. Their accounts are found within the pages of Holy Scripture --there for the reading-- which today's Collect exhorts us to "hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest". Within those pages you will find ordinary, average lives, distinguished from their peers by only one characteristic: faith in God. When you read of Mary and Joseph doing their best in trying times to believe God and follow Him, you will have *hope* for your own struggles that seem to take you way past the point of endurance. When you encounter David, who sinned grievously, being called *a man after God's own heart*, you will have hope in your own battles with sin that seem never ending. When you read about Naomi, an elderly mother discouraged by hard times that she certainly didn't bring upon herself, being cheered by the amazing good providences her daughter-in-law Ruth receives, you will hope also in the mercies of God. And how many dozens of other instructive stories are there!

Secondly, our Christian hope exceeds the boundaries of this life. We are looking for something way, way past a physical healing, or winning the lottery, or whatever political party takes the lead, or some form of personal success, to "embrace, and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which [God] has given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ." "Pie in the sky when you die", some say? No... the privilege and honor of beholding the very One who has sustained and accompanied us in this life, who died on the cross to deliver us from sin and rose from the grave to assure us of our own resurrection. Our eternal home, where justice, righteousness, and love are the rule, where every good thing ever found on this dark earth will find its complete fulfillment. Where every investment made in the lives of others through acts of love and service will receive its reward and consequence. For what else could men possibly ask?

But what of our struggles with unbelief, when we are at our lowest point spiritually? What if our bodies hurt so badly that as much as we may wish it to be otherwise, we are very far from any religious sentiment? What if the hard rain of difficulties has been so relentless that we do not feel we can reconcile our experience with what the Scripture says is the nature and character of God? Can we wrestle with Job through the maze of doubt and anger against God that seems to drive us far from Him? Can we make friends with the all too human Jacob, whose problems were largely of his own making, who spun webs of deceit that nearly destroyed him, but was honored as one who wrestled with God and prevailed?

Our hope always needs help, and it will be supplied, says our Epistle, *through the power of the Holy Ghost*. This is true, godly hope, that prevails in all circumstances, whether good or bad, because its maintenance is not dependent upon how things go, but upon supernatural enablement. This is the sort of hope that is a witness and testimony to all that behold it, because it proves that God is indeed alive and real. When such hope is evident within us to others, especially in hard times, it speaks volumes about the God we worship, and the Christian faith we proclaim and confess.

I think I see now why Advent II has been set aside as “Scripture Sunday”. In the pages of the Bible we can trace the hopes of the faithful, especially in the Old Testament, who awaited the arrival of Messiah, the One prophesied by the fulfillment of every God-given expectation. And in the New Testament we are given faith through the promises it offers that this same Jesus Christ will return again to inaugurate His everlasting Kingdom. When our humble lives here are lived out in the light of eternity and encouraged by the abundant examples provided us in Scripture, through *hope* our trials will take on a significance and value utterly transforming our present experience of them.

Abounding in hope, we will have enough, we will have plenty to spare, for those many around us who have no hope at all.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.