

Homily for The Twenty Second Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year C)(29/08/10)

Hope provides a bridge between the present and the future. If I stand at the bus stop with hope that a bus will soon arrive, the expectation of this future event makes the present bearable: I don't mind waiting at the bus stop, because it won't be for long and then something good will happen. If the bus simply fails to appear, as the minutes slip by, I lose contact with the future; it looks as if the good event I had anticipated is just not going to happen, and suddenly things look rather bleak. What I can reasonably expect for the future affects how I feel in the present.

*'The fact that this future exists changes the present; the present is touched by the future reality, and thus the things of the future spill over into those of the present and those of the present into those of the future.'*¹

This link between future and present is very important if we are going to understand what the Pope says about hope. If we are sure of what the future holds, and that future is good, we can put up with all sorts of difficulties in the present. That's why we put up with all the irritations and time wasting and discomfort of air travel: we do it because we know that a good holiday lies at the other end of it.

*'[T]he present, even if it is arduous, can be lived and accepted if it leads towards a goal, if we can be sure of this goal, and if this goal is great enough to justify the effort of the journey.'*²

Hope means that I know where I am heading, and it is good; therefore I will be able to put up with all sorts of things now, in order to reach my future goal. Essential to the whole concept of being a people of hope is the idea that it changes the way we live. "Those who have hope must live different lives!"³ Looking at this from a slightly different angle we might say, the way we live our lives depends on what we are really hoping for. If my great hope for the future is to achieve happiness and success, then I will behave differently from someone whose great hope is to eradicate some particular disease, to use a crude example.

Hope, of course, is not some abstract thing. Just having hope in general is pretty meaningless. We all hope for something particular. Some of these hopes are relatively trivial, small and unimportant: I hope for good weather over the weekend. Others are more important: I hope for good health and a happy life. But we must be realistic and admit that these hopes are not absolute, they do not guarantee happiness. What if my hopes come to nothing? What if it rains and the wind blows all weekend, or my health or life do not turn out as I desired? Will that be the end of me? Furthermore, even if all does turn out as I had hoped and I

¹ Spe Salvi n. 7

² Spe Salvi n. 1

³ Homily at Mass, Washington Nationals Stadium, 17/04/08.

get just what I wanted, will that really be enough to make me happy? All the little hopes of daily life, even if I achieve them, somehow are never enough to let me sit back with a sigh and say “all is well”.

‘[W]e need the greater and lesser hopes that keep us going day by day. But these are not enough without the great hope, which must surpass everything else.’⁴

The little hopes sustain us through little trials; only what the Pope calls the ‘great hope’, the hope that cannot disappoint, the hope that cannot be defeated, cannot be silenced, can overcome all fear, doubt, temptation and failure. We need so badly to find something which will never let us down, something in which we can hope absolutely: ‘The hope which never disappoints is Jesus Christ’⁵. Without some sort of ‘great hope’ we cannot make great and life-changing decisions, especially if they call for some measure of self-sacrifice. If the temptation is great, or the consequences are serious, the hope must be correspondingly sure.

‘[I]n truly great trials, where I must make a definitive decision to place the truth before my own welfare, career and possessions, I need the certitude of that true, great hope of which we have spoken here.’⁶

Over the course of time people have sometimes relied on some other ‘great hope’, they have placed something else in his place. So Marx’s revolution set about creating a kind of secular utopia, but this foundered on the rocks of materialism because it neglected humanity’s spiritual dimension: it turned out to be a hope that deceives. Others have sought to create a better world by means of scientific progress, but once again this hope has proved illusory because, whilst it may expand the bounds of what humanity can do, it provides no corresponding answers to the questions what *should* we do. Only Jesus Christ is the hope which does not disappoint, and he sustains us with the knowledge, as we discovered last week in considering joy, that we are loved absolutely, without condition, and will be so loved for all eternity, regardless of whether we ‘deserve’ it or not. We have a future, and that future is certain. We know our lives will not end in emptiness: ‘Only when the future is certain as a positive reality does it become possible to live the present as well’⁷.

We have returned to the place from which we began. Hope is the bridge between the future and the present. This affects the way we live our own lives, because we are people for whom hope never dies. But it will, inevitably, also affect the lives of others. Pope Benedict is adamant that the Christian is called to be a guiding star of hope, one of the lesser lights that leads the wanderer to the great light of dawn, the light of Jesus Christ. This is the role of the saints above all things, but each of us is also called to be such a light:

⁴ Spe Salvi n. 31

⁵ Meeting with young people, St Joseph Seminary, New York 19/04/10

⁶ Spe Salvi n. 39

⁷ Spe Salvi n. 2

*'Human life is a journey. Towards what destination? How do we find the way? Life is like a voyage on the sea of history, often dark and stormy, a voyage in which we watch for the stars that indicate the route. The true stars of our life are the people who have lived good lives. They are lights of hope. Certainly, Jesus Christ is the true light, the sun that has risen above all the shadows of history. But to reach him we also need lights close by—people who shine with his light and so guide us along our way.'*⁸

What does Pope Benedict want us to believe about hope? He wants us to be reassured that the future is secure, that God who has loved us and still loves us will love us for all time, and that he wants us to experience the joy of heaven, that is the joy of knowing with certainty for all eternity that, at the deepest possible level, all is well. This knowledge about the future motivates us for the present moment. It drives us to be heralds of hope in a world that often seems despairing and locked in the grip of failure and disillusionment. We can encourage people in their smaller hopes – we can make the world better, we can make it more like the Kingdom of Heaven, as well as in the 'great hope'. Hope is a precious gift The Church and her children can offer to a needy world.

*'Our world has grown weary of greed, exploitation and division, of the tedium of false idols and piecemeal responses, and the pain of false promises. Our hearts and minds are yearning for a vision of life where love endures, where gifts are shared, where unity is built, where freedom finds meaning in truth, and where identity is found in respectful communion. This is the work of the Holy Spirit! This is the hope held out by the Gospel of Jesus Christ.'*⁹

⁸ Spe Salvi n. 49

⁹ Welcoming Celebration with young people, Barangaroo, 17/07/08