

Why should we hope?

Talk on Good Friday during the Triduum Retreat 18 April in the Jubilee Year of Hope 2025

Opening Prayer

I would like to begin by asking the prayers of Mary, who stands today beneath the cross. ‘At the cross her station keeping, stood the mournful mother weeping, close to Jesus to the last’. May we, through her prayers and in our celebration of this Triduum retreat, be close to Jesus.

Why should we hope?

I have been asked in this talk to address the question ‘why should we hope?’ Clearly the immediate motive for this question is the current Jubilee year with the theme ‘Pilgrims of Hope’. Pope Francis writes at the beginning of his document initiating the Jubilee: ‘Hope does not disappoint’, which gives the document its Latin title: ‘*Spes non confundit*’. This is a quotation from St Paul’s letter to the Romans chapter 5 verse 5. In the English Standard Version, our current Mass lectionary translation, this reads ‘hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts, through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us’. God’s love has been poured into our hearts. This is why we should hope.

Furthermore, according to St Paul, and in our own day Pope Francis, the basis of our hope is God’s love for us which is shown to us in the death of Christ on the cross, which we celebrate today on this Good Friday. Paul writes a few verses further on in Romans chapter 5: ‘God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us’. (Romans 5:8): ‘while we were still sinners’. Pope Francis continues in section 3 of his same document ‘Hope is born of love and based on the love springing from the pierced heart of Jesus upon the cross’.

This piercing of the heart of Jesus is the moment which is at the centre of the St John Passion which we will hear in the Liturgy of the Cross this afternoon. Jesus’ heart is pierced with a lance as he hangs dead on the cross, and from it there flows blood and water. This is taken to symbolize the water of baptism and the body and blood of the Eucharist and therefore the life of the sacraments which come to us from Christ on the cross and mediates to us sinners his saving love.

Our hope has to survive in a world which has been wrecked by sin, evil and death – our sin, evil and death. Left to ourselves, our primordial subjection to sin leads to death, from which we cannot save ourselves; it is a state of utter hopelessness. We need a saving from this sin and death and hopelessness to be enacted within our human mortal lives, which requires a death, Christ’s death, leading to life, Christ’s resurrection and therefore in due time our resurrection who have participated in his sacraments. This is the basis and the foundation of our hope.

A Good Friday

According to the original story in the book of Genesis, which we will hear at the beginning of the readings of the Easter Vigil, it was the sixth day on which God created man; he looked at his creation and he saw that it was very good. God created man on the sixth day, namely the Friday, the day before his Sabbath rest. God saw and said that this creation on Friday was good. It was,

we might say, a good Friday. But we fell, the primordial tragedy and disaster of human life. Sin and evil contaminates this holy and good creation. Man has no power to help himself, so God himself has to come to the rescue in Christ. It was on another Friday, another Good Friday, that Christ died for us and from his pierced side there flowed the life that gives us eternal life.

This suggests then that we should hope because we are forgiven and because we are given eternal life. This is Year C of the liturgical cycle in which especially we read from the gospel according to Luke. So, last Sunday, Palm Sunday, we heard the Passion according to Luke. Luke in his Passion narrative focusses especially on forgiveness. At the brutal moment of the nailing on the cross, amazingly Jesus prays. He prays: 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do'.

And then there is an exchange with one of the two criminals crucified with him. In Christian tradition, he becomes Dismas, the good thief, 'Jesus', Dismas prays, 'remember me when you come into your kingdom'. Jesus replies 'Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise'. Today, you will be with me in paradise; a truly amazing promise! This today of which Jesus speaks is the eternal day, the 8th day of the resurrection. It is the promise of eternal life. The font of baptism in Christian tradition often has 8 sides. Dismas here on his cross represents all human sinners needing the saving promise of God.

Does this hope come easily?

At this point I want to acknowledge that this hope does not always come easily. It can be subject to uncertainty, to doubt and to the debilitating worry of impending disappointment. This is clear already in Scripture.

All the accounts of the resurrection, show the disciples hesitating and struggling at first to recognize Jesus and to come to faith in the power and implication of the resurrection. So, in Luke's account of the resurrection, in the walk on the road to Emmaus, two disciples are walking in dejection and to the one who joins them, who they do not yet recognize as the risen Jesus, they explain their dejection: 'we had hoped that [Jesus of Nazareth] was the one to redeem Israel'. It is only in the completion of their journey that their dejection turns to joy when their eyes are opened and Jesus reveals himself to them in the breaking of the bread. We likely in our lives will know the same pattern, moments of dejection and, pray God, moments when our eyes are opened to the hope that is held before us.

Being set free from the power of sin to enslave us

I have noted that hope can be subject to uncertainty, to doubt and to the debilitating worry of impending disappointment. It is true too that at times we can still feel very subject to sins which enslave us. Can we still hope in the face of the besetting sins which can so affect and trouble us? I know that this worries many, nor am I immune.

For early Christian monks, as for the Fathers of the Christian tradition generally, there was a strong belief in the power of demons to enslave human life. Maybe people today can find this talk of demons strange and uncomfortable, but the effects of these demons in human life can be only too familiar: gluttony, lust, anger for example. Enslavement can be seen only too clearly in

addiction. We have our personal problems and the difficulties of our tortured world daily confront us.

There are particularly well known and rightly feared addictions, which prove particularly destructive of human lives: for example to alcohol, drugs, gambling. There are addictions to pornography, to internet use, work, our reputation and so on; the demons of addiction in our modern world are legion and they have this in common that they offer gratification which becomes habitual and which robs us of our freedom, of our hope and of our joy. They spawn lies and become a cancer in human relationships. We need hope to be set free from the power of addiction in our lives and in the lives of those we love.

It seems likely and more than likely that Dismas, the good thief, knew well these enslavements, because he says to the bad thief, who was mocking Jesus for his failure to save himself and them: ‘Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.’ We are like Dismas, not like Jesus, but like Dismas we, even with the last gasp of life, can pray ‘Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom’ and receive the promise ‘Today you will be with me in paradise.’

This hope requires perseverance and great humility

There is great need for perseverance, a word which has a very clear connection with hope. St Paul at the beginning of his letter to the Colossians (chapter 1 verse 23) exhorts believers: ‘continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister’.

There is also a great need for humility and not to be too greedy. A monk of another monastery once told me how at his ordination to the priesthood without notice or warning his addiction to smoking, which was a real problem for him, was simply taken away. I was impressed and asked him if anything else had been taken away as well, but he said no just this one thing. Perseverance in hope is needed because travelling along the way of hope is a long life-time journey and we do not yet see the destination. Paul again in his letter to the Romans (chapter 8 this time, verses 23 to 25) writes ‘We wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience’.

Perseverance and the desert monastic tradition

But if it is a long journey; if we have to wait for it with great patience, it is perhaps not surprising that not a few will abandon the journey and we may well be tempted to do this ourselves. In the desert monastic tradition a particularly pernicious problem for monks (and we might say simply committed Christians) was what is known as the noonday demon or it is given the name acedia. It is a shape shifter, now tiredness and listlessness, now boredom, now dejection and depression, now disgust with one’s life and the people with whom one lives. One can see what a clear attack this is on hope. It is said that acedia emptied monasteries and we might say today that it empties

churches. It evacuates hope. Evagrius, monastic theologian of the 4th century, writes of this affliction as follows, these are some extracts:

The demon of acedia – also called the noonday demon – is the one that causes the most serious trouble of all ... First of all he makes it seem that the sun barely moves, if at all, and that the day is fifty hours long. Then he constrains the monk to look constantly out the window, to walk outside the cell, to gaze carefully at the sun to determine how far it stands from the ninth hour [the time of the daily meal] to look now this way and now that to see if perhaps [one of the brethren appears from his cell]. Then too he instils in the heart of the monk a hatred for the place, a hatred for his very life itself, a hatred for manual labour. He leads him to reflect that charity has departed from among the brethren, that there is no one to give encouragement. Should there be someone at this period who happens to offend him in some way or other, this too the demon uses to contribute further to his hatred. This demon drives him along to desire other sites [for example another monastery where the grass is greener, Evagrius implies] where he can more easily procure life's necessities, more readily find work and make a real success of himself ... He joins to these reflections the memory of his dear ones and of his former way of life. He depicts life stretching out for a long period of time, and brings before the mind's eye the toil of the ascetic struggle and, as the saying has it, leaves no leaf unturned to induce the monk to forsake his cell and drop out of the fight.

So, Evagrius. Thank you for your patience in bearing with this long quotation; I want in particular to highlight how at the outset he seems to be talking about something almost humorous – a bored monk obsessed about his dinner and looking out for the opportunity for a gossip, but then it shifts suddenly, as if coming from nowhere, into use of the strong and fearsome word 'hatred'; the monk in the grip of this demon finds himself hating the brethren, hating the life and of course unconsciously hating himself and his lack of zeal. I think this is a devastatingly accurate account of an all too common trap of the spiritual life. So, the question: why should we persevere in hope? Or maybe better, how can we persevere in hope?

St Paul and perseverance, the gift of the Spirit

I think, despite the ravages of the noonday demon, that there are encouragements and respites on the way. These are the gift of the Holy Spirit and they come to us in prayer and in moments of unexpected, and it must be admitted, often very fleeting grace. We need humbly to accept them, and humbly to recognize that they are enough for us, to be satisfied and at peace with them.

I would like to go back to look at the passage from Romans, chapter 5, with which I began. Paul writes (verse 5) 'Hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts *through the Holy Spirit* who has been given to us'. He returns to this point and expands on it in chapter 8 'Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groaning too deep for words'.

Here is the point. For Paul Christians have a discernible experience of the Spirit and this experience can be therefore a sure foundation for their hope. This is very clear in his letter to the Galatians, who he chides fiercely for their backsliding into observance of, and reliance upon, the

Law. He speaks bluntly: 'Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish?' (Galatians 3:2-3).

Hearing with faith. This can come in different ways, but I would say that the attack of addiction and the ravages of the noonday demon, are addressed, so far as they can be, which is not completely in this life, by persevering fidelity in prayer, especially the Work of God as Benedict calls it – the Liturgy of the Hours and by personal prayerful reading of Scripture, *Lectio Divina*, by going out in love towards others, those who need our love. These can be the instruments and agents of our hope.

There are moments. St Gregory the Great writes of these. He says that desire for God must be ardent and patient. The soul may catch glimpses of God through the knowledge of love, but from these it will inevitably fall back and then the wiles and temptations of evil will afflict all the stronger.

If we rejoin the two dejected and depressed disciples on their road from Jerusalem to Emmaus, lamenting the disappointment of their hope, we hear Jesus say to them 'O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory? And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself'. In other words, he takes them through a Liturgy of the Word and a *Lectio Divina*, a practice and an experience.

They then arrive in Emmaus, they reach their goal, and there is a meal. Jesus breaks bread. They only recognize him then, but in that very moment of recognition, he vanishes from their sight. They are left looking at broken bread, as we do in the Liturgy of the Eucharist. And only now in hindsight do they say to each other 'Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?' And they get up and return to Jerusalem. They recover their hope through Word and Sacrament and so they find the reason and foundation for their hope. In communion with them, we are invited to do the same.

Concluding prayer

Let me conclude with this prayer, which opens the Liturgy of the Word at the Easter Vigil. Its final petition makes clear why I have chosen it. Let us listen with quiet hearts to the Word of God. Let us meditate on how God in times past saved his people and in these, the last days, has sent us his Son as our Redeemer. Let us pray that our God may complete this paschal work of salvation by the fullness of redemption and the fulfilment of our hope. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.