

Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord 2020

“A lot of people are looking for hope, Archbishop!” I hear this daily, and small wonder. COVID-19 and its repercussions continue to take a serious toll on people’s lives. A large part of the angst comes from the now all-too-real fact that a great deal of what we had relied upon as a secure foundation for our lives has proven to be not very reliable at all. So, the question is arising with particular urgency right now: Where do we look for hope? And is that hope grounded on something solid?

Well, as a Christian people we know that hope is found in the person of Jesus Christ. There is nothing more solid and reliable than his love for us. In him we do have real hope. Yet even among believers there is still anxiety; the hope given in Christ is somehow escaping us. So, we need to examine this carefully.

The texts of Sacred Scripture this morning lead us in this necessary self-examination. To get us ready for what they teach us, let’s first ask ourselves a question. Is it possible that maybe - just maybe - we’ve been relying on something other than Jesus, trusting too much in ourselves and our own projects rather than in the love of God? Pope Francis has recently posed the question this way: have we been living on the basis of self-centered expectations rather than God-centered hope? It is true that many of us are looking for hope right now, but it will not be found as long as we confuse hope with expectation.

This is a helpful distinction to make: expectation vs hope. In a recent address to the priests of Rome, the Holy Father explained the difference between the two (cf. *Meeting with the Priests of the Diocese of Rome*, Feb 17, 2020) . Expectations, he said, are self-referential, fashioned from a desire to get what I want and shaped according to standards that I define. They are based upon an illusion of self-sufficiency and an assumption of autonomy. Such expectations will inevitably fail and leave us disappointed and embittered. Hope, on the other hand, is centered not on myself but on God, not on my desires but on the divine will, not on my projects but on the plan of the Father. It is based upon an honest recognition of my weakness and dependence and so trusts peacefully in the providence of God. This is hope, and it will never disappoint (cf. *Romans 5:5*).

Now we are ready to turn to the Scripture texts for this mass. There we are given an illustration of what happens when life is based on expectation instead of hope. The first Gospel passage recounted the triumphal entry into Jerusalem of Jesus accompanied by cheering crowds. To use a now-familiar image to describe this, Jesus could see in the people surrounding him a curve of rising expectations. The people are hailing him as the long-awaited King and Messiah. Many of those who came with him to Jerusalem had been witnesses to astounding miracles, and word had spread quickly like a contagion. Could this at long last be he, the one we have awaited? By the time Jesus approached the gate of the city, that curve of expectation, far from flattening, had rocketed skyward as they spread garments and palms before him, and acclaimed him with cries of “Hosanna to the Son of David.”

It didn’t last long, though. The problem was expectation. They saw and interpreted Jesus only in their own worldly terms. They expected the Messiah to free them from political oppression and establish an earthly kingdom. They were projecting on to him their own self-referential

expectations of how God should act in their life. Those expectations were shattered when they saw Jesus arrested and crucified. How could *that* be? In all likelihood they walked away disappointed and embittered.

That experience of the crowd long ago can serve as a mirror in which we see ourselves reflected today as we struggle with the fallout of the pandemic. For a long time Western society has been riding a rapidly and steeply rising curve of expectations pertaining to things like security, autonomy and getting ahead in life. Such expectations have been revealed by the COVID-19 crisis to be unreliable. Our curve, too, has come crashing down. In consequence, disappointment, bitterness and anxiety now abound.

Clearly, what is necessary at this moment – and into the future - is a renewal of mindset, a new vision, so that henceforth we shall see and understand where true hope is to be found and live from that. What has to happen is put by St. Paul this way: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus” (*Philippians 2:5*). That’s from the verse immediately before the passage we heard from his *Letter to the Philippians*. In order to live no longer from ephemeral expectations but from solid hope, the mindset of Jesus must become our own.

What does this mean? Well, consider: St. Paul tells us that Jesus willingly emptied himself of the divine glory that is properly his in order to assume to himself our weak human nature. In that nature, Jesus was always obedient to the Father, even to the point of giving his life for us on the Cross. Which is to say, Jesus lived not from his own projects but the plan of his Heavenly Father; he placed no expectations on God, but knew that he would be cared for, that he would receive all that he needed, and so he humbly surrendered, in full confidence, to the Father’s providence. Jesus lived not from expectation but hope, and that hope was vindicated beyond any and all human expectation when the Father raised Jesus from the dead. This is what it means to have the mind of Jesus Christ.

Hope is real and trustworthy when it is centered on God, who is always faithful to His promises. It demands that we place no expectations on God with respect to how He should be acting in our lives, and invites us to be ready instead for surprises. That is what Isaiah would have learned. It is not clear how he expected his Suffering Servant prophecy to be fulfilled by God, but we can know for certain that he would have been astonished at the manner of its accomplishment. God will astonish us, too, if we but lay aside expectation and place all our hope in him; if, in other words, the mind of Christ becomes our own.

Here we see the grace to pray for in this Holy Week that begins today: that we be enabled to put on the mind of our Lord. These are important days. Public health officials tell us we are in a critical period right now, looking to see if all the preventative measures to date will lead to a flattening of the curve. Well, Holy Week is itself a critical time in our life of faith. It is a sacred moment in which the Christian community seeks through repentance to lower entirely any curve of self-centered expectations that may have arisen within us. If any curve is to shoot upwards, may it be that of real hope, which will be ours when we centre our lives always and only in the astonishing love of our God.

Most Reverend Richard W. Smith St. Joseph’s Basilica (Livestreamed) April 5, 2020