

THE REASON FOR YOUR HOPE

April 30-May 1, 2005: The Sixth Sunday of Easter

The Scripture texts that the Church invites us to reflect upon during the Easter season offer us some wonderful insights into the life and faith of that early Christian community. The first reading of the Easter season is taken not from the Old Testament as the other Sundays of the Church's year, but from a New Testament book, the Acts of the Apostles. This is really the first history book of the Church and it tells the story of how the small and fearful band of apostles and disciples of Jesus grew in faith and courage and moved out from Jerusalem to all parts of the then known world. The second part of Acts notes particularly that this happened through the travels and preaching of St. Paul.

The second readings of the Easter season are taken from early pastoral letters written by early leaders of the Christian community to the faithful in the towns they had visited and to whom they had introduced through their preaching the story and teaching of Jesus. This year we are reading from the first pastoral letter of St. Peter from which we do not often read in our liturgy. Scripture scholars tell us that in many cases the authors of these pastoral letters would take the texts of the hymns used at their liturgy or instructions in the faith and incorporate them into the pastoral letters they wrote and which have been passed on to us. Today's second reading does just that. It is a section of what is believed to have been an instruction given to people preparing for baptism in the early Church. And like much of this genre of Scripture it tells us something about the faith of the early believers.

I suggest that we pay attention to one particular line in this text. The author tells those preparing for baptism and us "Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for the reason for your hope." This of course tells us that these early believers were people of hope. Are you?

It would be important in order to really understand this text to make a distinction between optimism and hope. Optimism is a feeling based on nothing particularly solid that everything will turn out alright. It is like that song that was popular several years ago "Don't worry. Be happy!". Optimism actually distorts reality and makes it look better than it really is. It sees the glass as half full rather than half empty. Optimism finds its source in

us: “I can make this situation better.”, “God must have a reason for this.”, “Things will get better.”.

However hope is something different. Vaclav Havel, the poet-philosopher from Czechoslovakia who was a leader in the revolution against the Communist regime there and who became the first president of the Czech Republic once wrote about his experience of hope in the midst of the situation in his country under Communism. “I think that the deepest and most important form of hope, the only one that can keep us above water and urge us to good works, and the only true source of the breathtaking dimension of the human spirit and its efforts, is something we get, as it were, from “elsewhere”. It is this hope, above all, which gives us the strength to live and continually to try new things, even in conditions that seem as hopeless as ours do here and now.” I do not know what faith perspective, if any, he had, but he put his finger on an important distinction. Hope is not of our making. Hope is rather the assurance of God’s faithfulness even in troubled times. The hopeful person does not distort reality into something other than what it is but faces reality with hope.

Are you a person of hope?

If so, what is the reason for your hope? In today’s Gospel Jesus gives us a reason. He tells his disciples in this part of his “farewell discourse” from John’s Gospel that he will not leave them orphans. Who more than orphans attracts our compassion? Recall during the recent tsunami the stories that moved us about children left orphaned by the disaster. Or consider all the children orphaned by the AIDS epidemic especially in the third world. In the Hebrew culture of Jesus’ day orphans along with widows were the most vulnerable members of society because they had no one to protect and take care of them. That’s why we hear so often that Jesus and the early Church urged Christians to especially care for “widows and orphans”.

But Jesus assures the disciples that he would not leave them orphaned. And that is the reason for our hope. We have the deep and abiding assurance that God/Jesus will not leave us alone and unprotected. We have the assurance that in all circumstances and situations God is “somehow” being faithful to us. I find myself asking when things seem difficult and it “feels” like God has abandoned me “How is God being faithful to me **now**?” It’s not a question of “if” God is being faithful to me. I believe that God is always faithful even when it feels like God may have abandoned me so the question

is “**How?**” That assurance is deeper than the turmoil, sadness, frustration, or anxiety on the surface. And that is the reason for our hope.

The one who believes in Jesus and his promise is a person of hope even when hope is difficult because hope relies not on myself and my own machinations to better a situation, but it relies on God and God’s faithfulness to me in all times and seasons. That is the reason why people join faith communities ----- because they are communities of hope. No one joins communities where there is no hope. People are attracted to hope-filled communities of faith. I believe that often people who loose hope stop coming to Mass or distance themselves from their faith community. In doing so they are cutting themselves off from a source of hope.

May Sacred Heart grow more and more as a community of hope and thus attract more and more believers to share life and faith with us!