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"If it were not for hope, the human heart would break."

Walking through Calvary Cemetery in Saint Paul, I came across a tombstone bearing the phrase: "If it were not for hope, the human heart would break." Judging from the dates etched on the marker, the child was less than two years old when she died. Immediately, I thought of conversations I have had with parents whose children have died. The searing pain of loss, and the absence of a future with these children, easily created a sense of paralysis and despair. Finding a way through the dense darkness of death and ambiguous loss requires a faith that allows one to hope while searching for light. The recent discovery of the body of Jacob Wetterling, who had been missing for nearly twenty-seven years, brought an odd sense of closure for his parents, Patty and Jerry, his three siblings and the entire state of Minnesota. Jacob was kidnapped on October 22, 1989. His family never gave up hoping for his return. Armed with an abiding sense of faith, the family never wavered in their hope of finding Jacob. In recognizing Jacob's death and the death of any child, we are called out of our denial into the stark and painful reality of an indelible wound that will always bear the scar of loss. Struggling with the myth of closure, we can hesitantly assume that the good will of those who love us and that the grace of God will grant us some modicum of peace. There is no way to comprehend the death of a child, except through the eyes of faith and hope. "If it were not for hope, the human heart would break."

Sorting through the incomprehensible array of losses that confront us as human beings requires a faith not easily understood in the swirling cluster of ordinary human emotions found in the grieving process. Often, during a liturgy or a talk I might be giving, I am conscious of the enormity of hidden pain and sorrow in the brave faces of those who have undergone bewildering losses. Confusion, fear, anger, anxiety, uncertainty and doubt can, and often do, lead to denial, lethargy and depression. Putting on a happy face is not a bad strategy for recovery, but it is no permanent answer to a genuine acceptance of loss. To ease us out of a catatonic state of mind, the gift of hope provides a roadmap out of denial and a world of magical thinking. Beginning to imagine a future and the possibility of tomorrow is not a surrendering of the catastrophic reality of one's loss; it is allowing for faith and hope to awaken the heart to life without the presence of a loved one. As I struggle with the recent death of my oldest sibling, I have come face to face with the absence of one who has known me all my life. Lost are the peculiar rituals of a lifetime lived in the company of one another. In the intertwining of our lives over these many years, memories of sorrow and joy now come together with my tears in the acceptance of her physical absence. "If it were not for hope, the heart would break."

In dealing with loss and uncertainty, the readings for the Thirty-Third Sunday of Ordinary Time captivate the community with apocalyptic levels of paranoia and frightening change. Hyper vigilance becomes the watchword in our first reading from the Prophet Malachi (4:1-2). His cataclysmic predictions set an ominous theme:

"See the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all arrogant and evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes will burn them up so that it will leave them neither root nor branch."

Plagued with uncertainty and political insecurity, Malachi challenges the post-exilic community of Israelites who have grown comfortable, lax in their prayer rituals, lukewarm in their faith, and disillusioned. Malachi assures them that if they persevere in remembering their God, "The sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings." As we prepare to end the liturgical year, the study of the end times (eschatology) becomes imperative. As Advent signals the end of time, it also offers us the hope of the redemptive work of Jesus as Messiah. Soon and very soon, the musical strains of "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" will trigger the hope

that will sustain the grieving and heart-broken among us.

The invitation to perseverance is at the heart of the gospel teachings and the ultimate triumph of patience would become an invitation to salvation. The messianic promise of Jesus would be preserved in the early Christian Communities, but would not guarantee immunity from suffering, pain, persecution and death. St. Paul in his Second Letter to the Thessalonians (3:7-12) offered a heightened sense of conviction that Jesus was coming at any moment, so be alert! Paul was adamant that community members, even in their grief and uncertainty, would not become burdens on the community. In fact, he advised: "Anyone unwilling to work should not eat." Paul was addressing freeloaders who were taking advantage of the generosity of the Christian community. Paul, like Jesus, was a teacher who understood that one teaches better through actions than through words. Perhaps it was Paul who first coined the aphorism: "Jesus is coming, look busy!"

Creating a context for apocalyptic thinking, the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Roman army in 70 A. D. provided a rude awakening to Christians throughout the Roman Empire. Persecutions and the deaths of Christians followed Christian communities everywhere. Our gospel reading for today's liturgy becomes a harbinger of eschatological thinking in the preaching of Jesus, who repeatedly stated that his kingdom was not of this earth. The gospel of Luke (20:27-38) fires our imaginations with catastrophic intensity and dire predictions about the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. All three Synoptic gospels (Matthew 24:1-3; Mark 13:14; Luke 20:27-38) speak directly to the destruction of the Temple. The distressing message of Jesus regarding persecution of his followers creates an edge of panic among his disciples and prompted them to ask: "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?" Jesus assures his faithful disciples that even though they are rounded up and put on trial because of his name:

"I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand and contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents and friends, and they will put some of you to death, but not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance, you will gain your souls."

Jesus' words are comforting, but demand a genuine willingness to "let go, and let God." While there is a certain cliché ring to the phrase, the willingness to trust in the providential care of Jesus demands a confidence that might prove to be rather elusive when "push comes to shove." Jesus counsels his disciples to remain calm, for all that they need, and need to say, will be provided. Perhaps a walk-through Calvary Cemetery might offer all of us an infusion of hope during our doubts. Accepting the limitations of life and the unpredictable catastrophes that might befall us, discovering the courage to hope once again is, indeed, a gift we can give ourselves and to others.

Having survived the muckraking and circus-like presidential campaign for the past year, we, as a nation, search for hope amid profound differences. Seeking some modicum of forgiveness and peace, we pray that the nation will regain a status reflecting the need to work for the common good. Moving beyond the rhetoric of clandestine emailing or non-filtered tweeting, we must address our grief, anger and differences in candid conversations based upon civility and respect. Rediscovering faith in a true democratic process, we can become a nation of hope. Indeed, "if it were not for hope, our hearts would break."

Peace, Fr. Joe Gillespie, O.P.



The grocery store wasn't all that busy when I shopped for a few items. Finishing rather quickly, I headed for the nearest check-out counter and patiently waited for the line to move. Catching up on all the latest gossip is one advantage of the "scandal newspapers" that are within reach while waiting in line. Honestly, I had no idea that Tom Cruise was dating an alien or that Prince Charles' wife, Camilla, was reportedly hauled off (minus her Bombay Gin) to some rehab center in Bangalore, India. Growing bored with the preposterous headlines, I was distracted by the array of candy bars within reach. Contemplating choosing a Kit-Kat rather than a Mounds Bar, I was caught off guard by someone singing a medley of Elvis Presley tunes beginning with, "You Ain't Nothing But a Hound Dog" and ending with "Precious Lord Take My Hand."

The singing cashier could have easily been trying out for American Idol while she whipped each grocery item by an electronic scanner with rhythmic precision and animated gestures. I was fascinated by her ability to choreograph the movement of the grocery items, make change while engaging the customers with good natured banter and respect. When people ask me where I get my sermon topics, I simply say, "Just getting out of bed provides a running start!" Edging my way through the check out line and helping the singing cashier to bag the groceries (Paper of plastic?), the remaining lyrics of "Love Me Tender" found their way from her lips into my heart:

"Love me tender, love me sweet, never let me go.
You have made my life complete and I love you so."

There were no formal proposals for marriage exchanged, just cash, but I must confess she turned a dull morning into a memorable event, a mini heavenly paradise of sorts. As I prepared to leave the store, I wanted to linger a bit as she intoned:

"Precious Lord, take my hand; lead me on, let me stand.
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn. Through the storm, through the night,
lead me on to the light. Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me home."

As we all search for a way home, this last Sunday of Ordinary Time is celebrated as the Solemnity of Christ the King. Completing the liturgical year has led us full circle to a new beginning in search of the Kingdom of God. However, there is a significant irony inherent in ending the year with a feast celebrating Jesus Christ as King; especially since Jesus was so intent on denying that he was a king or creating a kingdom on this earth. Reframing the idea of king as a servant king, a crucified king, a non-violent king, a risen king, allows us to enter Advent with an unobstructed understanding that the world is once again open to being redeemed. Bridging the apocalyptic readings of the last two Sundays and the beginning of Advent, the feast might offer us an edge of confidence in understanding kingship as liberation from sin and the promise of the Kingdom to come.

In the gospel reading for this feast, Luke: 23-43, the scene unfolds with the crucifixion of Jesus. A banner with the inscription, "This is the King of the Jews" hangs over his head. On either side of Jesus are two criminals, both crucified in like manner. One of the criminals asks Jesus, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus replies: "Truly, this day you will be with me in Paradise." The repentant criminal was promised "paradise" by Jesus, but the divergent theological opinions in first-century Judaism are confusing as to what this concept actually meant. "Paradise" was perceived as "the end will be like the beginning." The referencing of the Book of Genesis and the loss of Paradise for Adam and Eve would become a condensed symbol of hope. The messianic fulfillment (redemption) would signal the opening of the gates of Paradise and the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God. The birth, death and resurrection of Jesus would symbolize the renewed friendship with God and the inauguration of the return of the prodigal sons and daughters. Redemption, repentance and rejoicing become the working premise of understanding the Kingdom of God. From a poetic point of view, the epic depiction of "Paradise Lost" and "Paradise Regained" found in John Milton's poetry offers a metaphorical roller-coaster through salvation history. I must warn you, however, reading Milton's poetry is no easy ride!

The chaotic portrayal of the crucifixion is found in all four gospels (John 19:17-37; Matthew 27:27-44; Mark 15:21-41; and Luke 23:33-43). However, it is only in the gospel of Luke where the dialogue between the criminals takes place. The crucifixion scene with the good criminal is uniquely Lucan and consistent with his emphasis on Jesus as the forgiving Savior who reaches out and embraces

sinners. The story is an illustration of Jesus' mission to offer salvation to all repentant people. While the "good thief" experienced a last minute conversion, a sort of get out of jail free, the offer of salvation is there for the asking. Jesus was not offering "cheap grace", but the offer of true hope for those who sought conversion. There is no mention of where the other criminal who had mocked Jesus' might be heading. Any guesses?

The feast of Christ the King portrays the opposite of what any worldly kingdom might be about. By passing the usual things of power, riches and pretentiousness associated with earthly kingship, Jesus invites us into the paradoxical understanding of a "servant kingship" marked by poverty, compassion, humility and freedom of choice. Unfortunately, many of our liturgies illustrate the opposite of these characteristics in triumphal processions, glittering vestments and regal musical settings. Everyone loves a parade, but this parade first leads us to Calvary and then to Paradise. The gospel of Luke consistently emphasizes that as followers of Jesus, we are to relate to one another by acts of service, not domination. Christian communities must be identified by their concern for others, those disenfranchised from the power elites. Our parade on the feast of Christ the King must be representative of the paupers and the princes, the poor and the rich, the sad and the happy, the lost and the found, the widows and the orphans. Salvation is offered to all and all are welcome.

The Feast of Christ the King prepares us by contrast for the Season of Advent. Moving away from royal processions and triumphal music, our celebrations will give way to the stark chill of winter, the silence of waiting and the searching amid darkness for the light of hope. Oddly enough, the Feast of Christ the King slipped into the liturgical calendar in 1925 as an antidote to the despair of a world caught between catastrophic wars and competing European kingdoms. Initially viewed by Pope Pius XI as a response to the rise of totalitarianism in Europe, the Feast would give Catholics a chance to swear allegiance to the Kingship of Jesus rather than to earthly dictators. Viewing Jesus' cross as the symbol of victory over sin, the Kingdom of God would be characterized by compassion, forgiveness and nonviolence.

The poignant scene of the "good thief" calling out to Jesus by name, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom" is a reminder that all of us must find the courage to call out to Jesus. Surrounded by hope, even in a world filled with violence and war, greed and selfishness we must search for the hand of Jesus who will lead us into the Kingdom. I remember quite vividly holding the hand of an elderly woman I had just anointed when she said, "Don't be afraid. I am going to see my Lord. Won't you join me?" Obviously, I'm still here, but the offer still stands.

As we sort out "new beginnings" after the most recent presidential election, the road to Paradise will continue to be filled with twists and turns. Searching for pivotal leverage points of change will demand negotiated compromises. Attempts "to drain the swamp" will require more than metaphorical rhetoric. Initiating significant changes will require a community of faith that relies on hope rather than revenge and seeks forgiveness rather than grudge holding. Seeking Paradise on this earth brings with it illusions of personal comfort, security, denial and grandiosity. However, regaining a sense of community that seeks the common good rather than personal advantage, the vestiges of the Kingdom of God become ever so apparent in the willingness to reach out and take one another's hands in friendship. A few years ago, I saw the The Peace Bridge in Derry, Northern Ireland. The bridge is more than a symbol of what was thought to be an unbridgeable gap between Protestants and Catholics. The bridge not only offers access to the opposite banks of the Foyle river, but it offers the hope of peace on both "sides of the aisle." Reaching out and grasping the hands of one another is, indeed, a step in the right direction to finding Paradise.

"When my way grows drear, precious Lord, draw me near.
When my life is almost gone.
Hear my cry, hear my call. Hold my hand lest I fall.
Take my hand precious Lord, lead me home."

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