

November 2, 2014 ~ All Souls Day

Hope Is Like an Anchor

Romans 6:3-9; John 6:37-40

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This is the will of my Father, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him may have eternal life. [John 6:40]

Take a walk in the early Christian cemeteries of Rome, built underground and known as the catacombs. You'll see symbols cherished by Christians of the first centuries.

You'll see the fish symbol, which today many see as a symbol of us Christians because we are as fish caught by the "fishers of men." However, to the early Christians, the fish is a symbol of Jesus himself.

Another common symbol you'll see is a boat anchor, which some people might find odd. However, the anchor symbolizes the firm hope we have in eternal life. A passage in the New Testament's Letter to the Hebrews puts it these words:

*Hold fast to the hope that lies before us.
This we have as an anchor of the soul, sure and firm.¹*

I like that. Our hope in Jesus' offer of eternal life is like an anchor that holds us *firm*.

Early Christians also decorated their tombs with an image of the Good Shepherd, that is, Jesus holding a lamb on his shoulders. The image of Jesus the Good Shepherd seems to be as important to those early Christians as the cross is for us today. It might strike some as odd for the Good Shepherd carrying a lamb to be in a cemetery. However, the image reminded those believers that the faithful departed were under the care of Jesus, who carries them to eternal life.

More than merely offering a warm feeling, the Good Shepherd image supports the message of hope in the eternal Communion that's the anchor of our souls.

Teenagers, this is how it applies to your life. When you take seriously the Christian faith that gathers us in this sacred space, when you take that step into a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ, when you accept His resurrection to be your resurrection, you begin to see that you have no reason to be afraid, including no reason to be afraid of dying. When you (and else) breaks free from fear, you break free to live your life the way Jesus calls you to live your life.

In today's second reading Saint Paul writes of our Christian conviction in these words:

*If, then, we have died with Christ,
we believe that we shall also live with him.*

Such is the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and it is the Good News that we proclaim.

And yet, sometimes we might baffle people with how we proclaim the Good News. For example, the story is told of a priest whose approach to the Gospel one Sunday confuses his parishioners. He concludes his homily by issuing a challenge: "Those of you who think you are going straight to hell, please stand up."

A moment passes and then another, when suddenly a man in the assembly rises to his feet, walks up to the priest, and faces the assembly. The priest looks at the man for a brief moment and then looks back at the assembly, asking everyone to stand for the *Creed*, the *Profession of Faith*.

After Mass, the priest pulls the parishioner aside and asks why he feels he'll go to hell. The man replies: "Father, it's not that I think I'm going to hell. I just didn't want people to see you standing there alone."

Of course, we proclaim the Gospel not with scare tactics, but by declaring (and living) a message of hope. And yet, Catholic teaching about praying for the dead and about purgatory might appear to confuse that message of hope. Our Protestant brothers and sisters veered away from this several centuries ago, while we Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox Churches have maintained it. So, I'd like to take a moment and briefly address that side of Christian teaching.

Purgatory is defined doctrine, but can be confused by Christian art, preaching, and literature as a place of fiery torment to be endured for a definite time period. Such imagery might suggest the culture of a period in Christian history, but is in no way central to affirming this teaching. At its core, Catholic and Orthodox doctrine simply affirms a spiritual state of transformation that happens at the moment of death and that's possibly instantaneous.

I sometimes wonder about the language some might use when referring to the "poor souls in purgatory." I would think that the soul is happy, joyful, grateful, elated, cheerful in knowing that he or she is being transformed by the grace of Jesus Christ to enjoy forever an eternal Communion with God, to dwell forever in the presence of the One-who-is-love.

Any prayers we might offer for those who go before us marked by faith – those we refer to as the *faithful departed* – those prayers flow from the hope that what Jesus says to you and me in today's Gospel proclamation is true:

*This is the will of my Father, that everyone
who sees the Son and believes in him
may have eternal life.*

When someone challenges Catholic teaching about praying for the *faithful departed*, I suggest you listen less to what he or she thinks we hold to and listen more to what we say when we pray. Such prayers flow from the hope that Jesus offers you and me.

So, I end with an example. After we say *Amen* to the Communion that's placed in our hands, in our hearts, and in our lives, I'll invite you to stand. I'll then pray:

*Grant ... that your departed servants,
for whom we have celebrated this paschal Sacrament,
may pass over to a dwelling place
of light and peace.*

No fiery torment. Nothing to fear.

Just a prayer of hope to be in eternal Communion with the One-who-is-love.

¹ Hebrews 6:19.