

The Gate of Hope - Second Sermon, Advent 2022

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*Lift up your heads, O gates;
be lifted, you ancient portals,
that the king of glory may enter (Ps 24: 7).*

We have taken this verse of the psalm as the guideline of the Advent meditations, meaning by the doors to be opened those of the theological virtues: faith, hope and charity. The temple of Jerusalem – we read in the Acts of the Apostles – had a door called “the Beautiful Gate” (Acts 3: 2). The temple of God which is our heart also has a “beautiful gate”, and it is the door of hope. This is the door that today we want to try to open to Christ who comes.

Waiting for the blessed hope

What is the proper object of “the blessed hope”, which we proclaim to be “waiting for” at every Mass? To realize the absolute novelty brought by Christ in this field, we need to place the Gospel revelation against the background of ancient beliefs about the hereafter.

On this point, even the Old Testament had no answer to give. It is well known that only towards the end of it one can find some explicit statement about a life after death. Before then, the belief of Israel did not differ from that of neighboring peoples, especially those of Mesopotamia. Death ends life forever; we all end up, good and bad, in a kind of dismal “common grave” which elsewhere is called *Arallu* and in the Bible the *Sheol*. No different is the dominant belief in the Greco-Roman world contemporary of the New Testament. It calls that sad place of shadows *Inferi*, or *Hades*.

The great thing that distinguishes Israel from all other peoples is that, despite everything, it continued to believe in the goodness and love of its God. It did not attribute death, as the Babylonians did, to the envy of the divinity which reserves immortality only to itself, but rather attributed it to man’s sin (Gen 3), or simply to one’s own mortal nature. At times, the biblical man did not keep silent, it is true, in the face of a fate that seemed to make no distinction between righteous and sinners. However, Israel has never come to rebellion. In some biblical prayers, it seems to have gone so far as to desire and glimpse the possibility of a relationship with God beyond death: a being “torn from hell” (Ps 49:16), “to be with God always” (Ps 73, 23) and “be satisfied with joy in his presence” (Ps 16, 11).

When, towards the end of the Old Testament, this expectation, matured in the subsoil of the biblical soul, finally comes to light, it does not express itself, in the manner of the Greek philosophers, as the survival of the immortal soul which, freed from the body, returns to its celestial world. In harmony with the biblical conception of man, as an inseparable unity of soul and body, survival consists in the resurrection – body and soul – from death (Dan 12, 2-3; 2 Macc 7, 9).

Jesus suddenly brought this certainty to its noon and – what matters most – he gave it an irrefutable proof by rising from the dead. After him, for the believer, death is no longer a landing, but a take-off!

The most beautiful gift and the most precious legacy that Queen Elizabeth II of England left to her nation and to the world, after 70 years of reign, was her Christian hope in the resurrection of the dead. In the funeral rite, followed live by almost all the powerful of the earth and, on television, by hundreds of millions of people, the following words of Paul were proclaimed, by her express will, in the first reading:

*Death is swallowed up in victory.
Where, O death, is your victory?
Where, O death, is your sting?
The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.
But thanks be to God who gives us the victory
through our Lord Jesus Christ.
(1 Cor 15:54-57).*

And in the Gospel, still by her will, the words of Jesus:

In my Father's house there are many dwelling places...And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back again and take you to myself, so that where I am you also may be. (Jn 14: 2-3).

Hope, an active virtue

Precisely because we are still immersed in time and space, we lack the categories necessary to represent ourselves in what this “eternal life” with God consists of. It is like trying to explain what light is to someone who was born blind. St. Paul simply says:

It is sown dishonorable; it is raised glorious.

It is sown weak; it is raised powerful.

It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. (1 Cor 15:43-44).

Some mystics, already in this life, have been given to experience a few drops of the infinite ocean of joy that God keeps prepared for his people, but all unanimously affirm that nothing can be said about it in human words. The first of them is the apostle Paul. He confides to the Corinthians that, fourteen years earlier, he was taken to the “third heaven”, in paradise, and to have heard “unspeakable words that it is not lawful for anyone to pronounce”. (2 Cor 12, 2-4). The memory that that experience left in him is perceptible in what he writes on another occasion:

What eye has not seen, and ear has not heard,

and what has not entered the human heart,

God has prepared for those who love him. (1 Cor 2:9).

But let's leave aside what will be in the afterlife (about which we can say so little) and come instead to our present life. Reflecting on Christian hope means reflecting on the ultimate meaning of our existence. One thing is common to all, in this regard: the longing for living “well”, for “wellbeing”. However, as soon as you try to understand what is meant by “good”, two classes of people immediately arise: those who think only of the material and personal good and those who also think of the moral good of all, the so-called “common good”.

Regarding the former, the world has not changed much since the time of Isaiah and St. Paul. Both carry the saying that used to run in their time: “Let us eat and drink because tomorrow we will die” (Is 22, 13; 1 Cor 15, 32). More interesting is to try to understand those who propose – at least as an ideal – to “live well” not only materially and individually, but also morally and together with others. There are sites on the internet where elderly people are interviewed about how, while arrived at sunset, they evaluate the life they have lived. They are, in general, men and women who have lived a rich and dignified life, at the service of the family, culture and society, but without any religious reference. It is pathetic to see them trying to make people believe that one is happy to have lived thus. The sadness of having lived – and soon not living anymore! – hidden by their words, screamed from their eyes.

Saint Augustine expressed the core of the problem: “What is the use of living well, if it is not given to live always?”. Before him, Jesus had said: “What good is it for man to gain the whole world if he then loses his life?” (Lk 9:25). This is where the response of theological hope fits – and how it differs. It assures us that God created us for life, not death; that Jesus came to reveal eternal life to us and to give us the guarantee with his resurrection.

One thing must be emphasized in order not to fall into a dangerous misunderstanding. Living “always” is not opposed to living “well”. The hope of eternal life is what makes also present life beautiful, or at least acceptable. Everyone in this life has his or her share of the cross, believers and non-believers. But it is one thing to suffer without knowing for what purpose, and another to suffer knowing that “the sufferings of the present time are not comparable to the future glory that will be revealed in us” (Rom 8:18).

Theological hope has an important role to play in relation to evangelization. One of the determining factors in the rapid spread of the faith, in the early days of Christianity, was the Christian announcement of a life after death that was infinitely fuller and more joyful than the earthly one.

Emperor Hadrian had built spectacular villas for himself in various parts of the world and had prepared what is now Castel Sant'Angelo, a stone's throw from here, as his mausoleum. Close to his death he wrote a kind of epitaph for his grave. Speaking to his soul, he exhorted it to take a last look at the beauties and the amusements of this world, because – he said – you are about to go down “to colorless, arduous and bare places”. Hades! One can imagine the spiritual shock that must have caused, in an atmosphere like this, the promise of a life that is infinitely fuller and brighter than the one that was left with death. This explains why the idea and symbols of eternal life are so frequent in the Christian burials of the catacombs.

In the First Letter of St. Peter, the activity of the Church externally, that is, the propagation of the message, is presented as “giving reason for hope”: “Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope, but do it with gentleness and reverence” (1Pt 3: 15-16). Reading what happened after Easter, one has the clear feeling that the Church is born from a surge of “a living hope” (1Pt 1:3) and with this hope they set out to conquer the world. Even today we need a regeneration of hope if we want to undertake a new evangelization. Nothing is done without hope. Men go where there is an air of hope and flee where they do not feel its presence. Hope is what gives young people the courage to form a family or to follow a religious and priestly vocation, what keeps them away from drugs and other similar surrender to despair.

The letter to the Hebrews compares hope to an anchor: “This we have as an anchor of the soul, sure and firm” (Heb 6, 18-19). Sure and firm because thrown into eternity. But we have another image of hope, in a certain sense opposite: the sail. If the anchor is what gives the boat safety and keeps it steady between the swaying of the sea, the sail is what makes it walk, and advance in the sea. Both of these things does hope with the boat of the Church.

Compared to the past, we are today in a better situation with respect to hope. We no longer have to spend our time defending Christian hope from external attacks; we can therefore do the most useful and fruitful thing which is to proclaim it, to offer it and to radiate it in the world. Making not so much an apologetic as a kerygmatic discourse on hope.

Let's take a look at what has happened with regard to Christian hope for over a century now. At first there was the frontal attack on it by men like Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche. Christian hope was, in many cases, the direct target of their critique. Eternal life, hereafter, paradise: all these things were seen as the illusory projection of man's unsatisfied desires and needs in this world, as a “wasting in heaven the treasures destined for the earth”. Christians tried to defend the content of Christian hope, often with ill-concealed unease. Christian hope was “in the minority”. Eternal life was rarely spoken of and preached.

After having demolished Christian hope, however, the Marxist culture was not slow to realize that human persons could not be left without hope. And they invented the “Hope Principle”. With it, Marxist culture did not claim to have demolished Christian hope, but, worse, to have gone beyond it and to be its legitimate heir. For the author of the “Principle of hope” (principle, mind you, not virtue) it is certain that hope is vital for man. It is real and has an outlet which is “the revelation of the hidden man”, that is, of the still latent possibilities of humanity. The manifestation of the Son of man, Christ, is replaced by the manifestation of the hidden man, the parousia is replaced by utopia.

For a couple of decades, I remember, there was a lot of talk on the topic in universities and to many Christians thinkers it seemed very encouraging that there was someone on the other side who accepted to take hope seriously and to establish a dialogue on it. Especially since the reversal was so subtle and the language often similar. The heavenly homeland became the “homeland of identity”; not the place where man finally sees, face to face, God, but where he sees the real man, that in which perfect identity between what human being can be and what it is is achieved. The so-called “theology of hope” was born in response to this challenge, accepting, unfortunately, at times, its approach. The thing that is least perceived in all these writings is precisely what Peter calls “living hope” (1 Pt, 1,3), the thrill of hope, that is, life not ideology.

Now, I said, the situation has partly changed. The task we have before us, with regard to hope, is no longer that of defending it and justifying it philosophically and theologically, but of announcing it, of showing it and of giving it to a world that has lost the sense of hope and is sinking more and more into pessimism and nihilism, the true “black hole” of the universe.

Gaudium et spes

One way of making hope active and contagious is that formulated by St. Paul when he says that “charity hopes all” (1 Cor 13: 7). This is true not only for the individual, but also for the Church as a whole. The Church hopes for everything, believes everything, endures everything. It cannot limit itself to denouncing the possibilities of evil that exist in the world and in society. We must certainly not neglect the fear of punishment and hell and stop warning people of the possibility of harm that an action or situation entails, such as wounds caused to the environment. Experience, however, shows that more is achieved positively, by insisting on the possibilities of good; in evangelical terms, by preaching mercy. Perhaps the modern world has never shown itself so well disposed towards the Church and so interested in her message, as in the years of the Vatican Council. And the main reason is that the Council gave hope.

But in this way, do we not expose ourselves – some say – to be disappointed and to appear naive? This is the great temptation against hope, suggested by human prudence, or by the fear of being proven wrong by the facts and it is what is happening in part also towards the Council. As if daring to speak of “joy and hope” (*gaudium et spes*) had been a naivety of which we should even be a little ashamed. This is what many thought of Pope John XXIII at his announcement of the Council.

We must resume the movement of hope initiated by the Council. Eternity is a very large measure; it allows us to hope for everyone, not to abandon anyone without hope. The Apostle gave the Christians of Rome the command to abound in hope. “May the God of hope – he wrote – fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Rom 15:13).

The Church cannot give the world a better gift than to give it hope; not human, ephemeral, economic or political hopes, over which she has no specific competence, but pure and simple hope, the one that also, without knowing it, has eternity as its horizon and as guarantor Jesus Christ and his resurrection. It will then be this theological hope that will support all other legitimate human hopes. Anyone who has seen a doctor visit a seriously ill person knows that the greatest relief that he can provide, best of all medicines, is to say to him: “The doctor hopes; he has good hopes for you! ”.

Hope, understood in this way, transforms everything it touches. Its effect is beautifully described in this passage from Isaiah:

*Though young men faint and grow weary,
and youths stagger and fall,
They that hope in the LORD will renew their strength,
they will soar on eagles' wings;
They will run and not grow weary,
walk and not grow faint. (Is 40:30-31)*

God does not promise to remove the reasons for weariness and exhaustion, but he gives hope. The situation remains in itself what it was, but hope gives the strength to rise above it. In the Apocalypse we read that:

When the dragon saw that it had been thrown down to the earth, it pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle, so that she could fly to her place in the desert (Rev 12:13-14).

The image of the eagle's wings is clearly inspired by the text of Isaiah. It is therefore said that the great wings of hope have been given to the whole Church, so that with them it can, every time, escape the attacks of evil, overcome difficulties with enthusiasm.

“Get up and walk!”

The door of the temple called “the beautiful gate” is known for the miracle that occurred near it. A cripple lay before it begging for alms. One day Peter and John passed by and we know what happened. The cripple, healed, jumped to his feet and finally, after many years he had been lying there abandoned, he too went through that door and entered the temple “jumping and praising God” (Acts 3: 1-9).

Something similar could also happen to us with regard to hope. We too often find ourselves, spiritually, in the position of the cripple on the threshold of the temple: inert, lukewarm, as if paralyzed in the face of difficulties. But here the divine hope passes by us, carried by the word of God, and says to us too, like Peter to the cripple: “Get up and walk!” And we jump to our feet and finally enter into the heart of the Church, ready to take on, once again and joyfully, tasks and responsibilities. They are the daily miracles of hope. She is truly a great miracle worker; she puts thousands of cripples back on their feet, thousands of times.

In addition to evangelization, hope helps us on our personal journey of sanctification. It becomes, in those who exercise it, the principle of spiritual progress. It allows you to always discover new “possibilities for good”, always something that can be done. It does not let us settle down in lukewarmness and apathy. When you are tempted to say to yourself: “There is nothing more to be done”, hope comes forward and tells you: “Pray!”. You answer: “But I prayed already!” and she: “Pray again!”. And even when the situation should become extremely hard and such that it seems that there is nothing more to be done, hope still points you to a task: to endure until the end and not lose patience, uniting yourself with Christ on the cross. The Apostle, we have heard, recommends “abounding in hope”, but he immediately adds how this becomes possible: “by virtue of the Holy Spirit”. Not by our efforts.

Christmas can be the occasion for a leap of hope. The great modern poet of the theological virtues, Charles Péguy, wrote that Faith, Hope and Charity are three sisters, two adults and a little girl. They go down the street holding hands: the two big ones, Faith and Charity, on the sides and the little girl Hope in the center. Everyone, seeing them, thinks that it is the two big ones that drag the little one in the center. They are wrong! It is she who drags everything. Because if hope fails, everything stops.

If we want to give a proper name to this little girl, we can only call her Mary, the one who down here – says the other great poet of theological virtues, Dante Alighieri – “to mortal men” is “of hope a living spring”.

1. Augustine, On the Gospel of John, 45, 2 (Quid prodest bene vivere si non datur semper vivere?).

2. Cit. in Marguerite Yourcenar, *Memoirs of Hadrian*.

3. Ernst Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 3 vol. Berlin 1954–1959.

4. Ch. Péguy, *Le porche de la deuxième vertu*.

5. *Paradise*, XXXIII.

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