

3rd Sunday of Advent (C)
(Zephaniah 3:14-18 / Luke 3:10-18)
12.12.2021
Expectancy

“A feeling of expectancy had grown among the people.”

“Expectancy” is a word and a theme dear to St Luke. It is particularly present in his Gospel. We are told that Simeon was “expecting the consolation of Israel” (2:25), that Anna was speaking “about the child to all who were expecting the redemption of Jerusalem.” (2:38)

The expectancy of these pious Jews is summed up in the question posed to Jesus by the disciples of John the Baptist: “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?” (Lk 7:19)

The answer to this question was not straightforward for many of Jesus’ contemporaries. The Gospels bear witness to the fact that many did not recognise the long awaited Messiah who came to them in the person of Jesus while he was among them. And there were many more who were so shocked by his death that they felt betrayed in their hope and expectation.

For the French poet Paul Claudel, “there is something sadder to lose than life – the reason for living; sadder than to lose one’s possessions is to lose one’s hope.” Indeed the sad reality is that many of our contemporaries have simply given up on God, on others and on themselves.

Among the many causes for this situation, allow me to mention one of them. It seems to me that today many are devoid of expectations because they feel betrayed by leaders, in society and in church, who, in one way or another, have failed to honour the trust which was given to them. This feeling of distrust has grave consequences: people tend not only to reject the leaders but also the institutions they represent and even the values these institutions convey. For example, not only do people no longer trust their political leaders but many in Europe consider the democratic system itself to be unreliable and inefficient and, as a result, are tempted to give their vote to extreme parties.

One consequence of hopelessness is that, given that we still need to hope for something, we allow our fears, disappointments, and distrust to shape our hopes, to shape them in a distorted way.

The story of the two disappointed disciples on their way to Emmaus is a good example. Their expectation was not wrong but it was too small, too political, too conditioned by their desire to see Israel freed from the Roman pagan occupation. They were hoping that Jesus would be “the one to redeem Israel.” (Lk 24:21) In fact Jesus was in truth the redeemer of the whole world in a way that the two disciples could not have fathomed or ever hoped for.

At the moment, we see the same dynamic at work in many Christians, whose hopes are mixed with political ideology or who settle in petty, narrow, and self-centred expectations.

In one of his sermons in Greece, a week ago, Pope Francis warned us against such attitudes: “By calling us to conversion, John urges us to go ‘beyond’ where we presently are; to go beyond what our instincts tell us and our thoughts register, for reality is much greater than that. It is much greater than our instincts or thoughts. The reality is that God is greater. To be converted, then, means not listening to the things that stifle hope, to those who keep telling us that nothing ever changes in life, the pessimists of all time. It means refusing to believe that we are destined to sink into the mire of mediocrity. It means not surrendering to

our inner fears, which surface especially at times of trial in order to discourage us.” (Homily, 05.12.21)

During this Advent season, the conversion which John the Baptist invites us to live is a conversion to hope. Hope that when we fall, when bad things happen in the world, when we have been betrayed or when we have betrayed another... even then we never find ourselves at the end of the road. The creator God is ahead of us, waiting to open up fresh possibilities, a new door which leads, according to Pope Francis, “beyond where we presently are.”

In the present time of pandemic which drags on, it is our duty, as Christians, to be heralds of hope, to foster a feeling of positive expectancy in our communities. From this perspective the Synod of Bishops in Rome and the General Synod in Ireland are signs of hope for a Church more conformed to the Gospel. The words of the Lord heard in our first reading are there to encourage us as we walk the synodal path: “Do not let your hands fall limp, I will renew you by my love.”

The South African Protestant theologian John de Gruchy believes that hope is “an everlasting protest against nothingness and despair, against cynicism and hatred.” (n. 309)

All of us must protest against all the discourses and attitudes which sow seeds of violence and division, of tribal rivalry and sectarianism, of racism and all forms of discrimination. It is our responsibility and our duty to be prophets of hope, to stir up in our families and communities a feeling of expectancy for the common good and for a better world.

In the last pages of one of his books, the Jesuit theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin asked: “Successors to Israel, we Christians have been charged with keeping the flame of desire ever alive in the world. Only twenty centuries have passed since the Ascension. What have we made of our expectancy?” (*Le Milieu Divin*, p. 151)

We cannot give up on hope, we cannot give in to the temptation to despair and to settle for a life without expectancy.

In his address to young people in Greece, Pope Francis warned them against “the slayers of hope” and encouraged them to “nourish the courage of hope (...), the courage to go forward, the courage to take a risk and not remain on the couch.” (Address, 06.12.21)

Soon we will contemplate hope made flesh in the Child Jesus. May we, in our turn, allow hope to take flesh in us so that we may become courageous beacons of a fearless and joyful hope.