

Advent Focus of Hope

The primary theme and focus of Advent each year is the theological virtue of hope. The three theological virtues are faith, hope, and love; but in Advent the focus is hope. What does hope mean? What does it look like? How do we cooperate with it?

As a quick aside, many of you know I'm a very big Seahawks fan. I definitely lament when we have a 10:00 a.m. kickoff on Sunday because I'm kind of busy at 10:00 on Sunday—and a lot of y'all don't show up. Granted, you probably go to a different Mass. For a 10:00 kickoff I can't watch live, so I record it. By the time I'm done, the game usually ends around 1:05 if it doesn't go into overtime. I'm just finishing coffee and donuts here, or I'm driving back from SJV. When it's a 10:00 kickoff and I know the game is over, I'm not one of those who suspends suspense. I check the result. If we didn't win—delete on my DVR. If we did win, I'll take the time to rewatch the game.

Hope is very similar to that. Hope is knowing that the Lord Jesus has already won the victory. Because He has already won, we have nothing to fear in this life. Because God is for us, nothing should deeply or overly take away our peace. If I'm watching the game and I already know we won, and our quarterback throws a pick—or we fumble, or we're behind—I'm not worried, because I already know the outcome. It's much more enjoyable and easier to watch among the ups and downs. That is a good analogy for what Christian hope is meant to do for us. Life is challenging and difficult; there is also much that is beautiful. Amid the ups and downs, we shouldn't be too troubled, because we know the Lord Jesus has won the victory, and He desires every person to share in it. We hope for eternal life. We hope for holiness in this life. We hope to “taste and see that the Lord is good.” The Lord promises that this is our objective reality: it is finished; it is accomplished.

Vigilance: Keeping Hope Firm and Rooted

Advent calls us not only to hope (which is given to us in Baptism), but to the corresponding readiness that helps hope to stay firm and rooted—so that hope gives us the peace we desire, the peace we celebrate when the Prince of Peace comes at Christmas. What does that readiness look like? More or less: vigilance.

Throughout Advent—especially in the first week—the readings teach that hope is established by the Lord for us, but our ability to live into that hope has to do with vigilance. We want to know which team wins—and make sure we are on, and rooting for, the right team at the end. The “thief” comes to destroy; we must be vigilant so that we stay united with Jesus and don't get really off track.

There are many ways to get off track. Pope Benedict published an encyclical eighteen years ago today: his second, *Spe Salvi* (“saving hope”). It’s a beautiful letter. Rereading it in preparation for this homily, I was struck by how he names many false hopes we fall into—like a vague idea of “progress,” or trusting things that can’t actually save us. He notes that many of our “little hopes” aren’t bad in themselves: I can hope the Seahawks win today; I can hope a particular pastoral initiative in the parish bears fruit—short plug for Hallow; I’ll cover it at the end; it’s going to be a major, long-term devotional initiative for our parish family. I can hope for a really good visit with my sister and her family. Those are good hopes. The Holy Father also warns there are very bad counterfeit hopes. Ultimately, we must stay vigilant for the only One who is our true hope.

Daily Readiness for His Presence

Dear friends in Christ, this Advent season challenges us to stay awake and be vigilant. When we hear today’s Gospel—“You do not know when your Lord will come”—I kind of do know when the Lord will come: He’s coming in about twenty-three minutes, right there. And He comes many times a day. Multiple times a day the Lord taps me on the shoulder: “I’m present. I love you. Are you paying attention?” A lot of times I’m not.

So, let’s reinterpret the Gospel in terms of daily vigilance. Am I vigilant not only for the Lord’s Second Coming (which will happen once) or my death (which will happen once), but for the multiple times each day that, in His goodness and love, He is present to me? It is not only the final victory; it is His presence with us today. Knowing that He has won the victory, we also know His victory is at work in our lives now as we turn to Him in love, trust, and surrender. Whatever I’m dealing with, I know the Lord will conquer and be victorious, and that, united to Him, I will be victorious in Him.

Praise be Jesus Christ.