

St. Paul, our great ancestor in faith, has left us a magnificent legacy of letters that reflect the style and content of his preaching. Paul would have carefully thought through the implications of his ideas and deliberately chosen the phrases he used to communicate his ideas. With that in mind, we can look to the opening of Paul's letter to the Thessalonians which we hear in our second reading today as a rich source of Paul's theology and insight into his relationship to the community.

One can almost picture the community listening to this letter being read to them, nodding in assent and remembering how Paul and his companions had preached those same themes to them. He was telling them who they were, and they recognized themselves in his address. Paul gives thanks for them, remembering all that they do in faith, rejoicing that their love extends beyond themselves, and commending the strength of their hope. Here he has not only mentioned these great virtues, but has placed them in the continuum of time; their faith is based on what God has done in the past, their love is the present extension of that, and their hope looks to its fulfilment in the future.



St. Paul is congratulating the community in Thessalonica on "your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ". This is the first of many occasions in which faith, hope and love are mentioned in the same breath. Perhaps the most well known is Paul's statement to the Corinthians: "Faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love". Faith, hope and love are called "theological virtues" because, as the Catechism of the Catholic Church explains (n.1812): "They relate directly to God, disposing us to live in a relationship with the Holy Trinity".

We often reflect on faith and we are always speaking of love. I wonder how often we take time to reflect on the theological virtue of hope? The word "hope" conjures up all the things we hope for, for ourselves and for those we love, and, ultimately our hope that one day we will enjoy the presence of God for all eternity in heaven.

The virtue of hope is about the future, but it is important, and perhaps surprising, to note that, while hope as a Christian virtue does concern the future, its focus is very much on the present. It is good to long with expectation for future happiness, but it is also true that such longing can distract us from the reality of the present moment. By the virtue of hope, we entrust the future peacefully to God and confidently leave it in God's hands, knowing that he who loves us will certainly continue to do so in the future.

A baby resting in the arms of its mother or father is not anxious about the future, nor is it excitedly looking forward to it. It is content. That is our model for hope. We adults cannot but think of the future. If we truly hope in God, however, we can be like that child. We need not be anxious about it, or distracted from the present by it, but we can entrust it to God, knowing how faithful God is to love. This frees us to focus on the present, even if our present is painful. When we place our hope in God we still the fears that are stirred up when our imagination goes wild, thinking up all the worst possible things that could happen to us.

We have to remind ourselves that there is no such reality as the future. What we think of as future is only real when it actually becomes the present. Prior to that it is nothing more than a figment of our imagination. It fills us with dread at times because we do not have the strength to cope with it, nor do we have the grace. The reason is that it is not present and so not real. If ever it becomes real, then we will have the grace and the strength to bear it, but not now.

In his letter to the Corinthians St. Paul assures us: "No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it". And in his letter to the Romans St. Paul states, "Hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us".

God has poured his Spirit into our hearts, and God will continue to do so. When we are afraid of the future, we are to call this truth to mind, and place all our trust in God who will calm our hearts. We are then free to focus on the grace of the present moment and give all our energies to receiving and giving love now as best we can. God loves us. Everything is to be seen in that light. St. Paul tells us that nothing else really matters except that we learn to love, and love well and St. John of the Cross reminds us that: "At the evening of life, we shall be judged on our love".

Let us look carefully at our lives, to check the direction in which we are headed. What are my hopes for myself, for my family? Am I being caught up in ambitions that are really just distractions from what really matters? Am I so anxious about the future or so distracted by my dreaming about it that I am not really focussing on the only life I have - which is the life of the present moment?

Thinking of God's love we can entrust the future to him. Thinking of the courage of Jesus, we can face the present, whatever its pain, in trust, knowing that the best way to help our future is to live the present moment as well as we can. Let us long for the eternal communion with God that is heaven. We are made for that and our hearts remain restless till we enjoy it. But this longing must not distract us from living now as truthfully and lovingly as we can, while remaining open to God's grace. The one for whom we long is with us now, and at the end of our life he will take us into his eternal embrace. May this sure hope give us the courage we need to concentrate now on living a life of love.