

Hope for the Holidays

In the name of him who became a servant for us, dear friends in Christ: I'd like to begin with a question for you to consider. It's this: what are you *hoping for* with regards to the upcoming holidays? What is it you'd most like to see or to receive or to experience? We all have certain optimistic expectations. What are yours?

It's safe to assume that for some (chiefly the younger set) such hopes have or will soon be set down on paper in the form a wish list addressed to jolly ol' St. Nick (or perhaps to others who are also known for their generosity during the holidays). The rest of you may be hoping for other things: the family gatherings, seeing friends and relatives who live some distance away, the festive meals, the time you'll spend together, the memories you'll make, the joy of giving, and all the rest of the things that make the holidays special: the decorations and lights, the music and carols, the seasonal treats, and whatever other traditions your family enjoys. You have in your mind's eye what you'd like to see – how you hopefully imagine things will turn out – don't you?

That's good. It's as it should be. Hold that thought. I don't want you to change any of it. But I do want you to *add* to your list of things hoped for. Because while that stuff I mentioned before is good, none of it really has to do with the reason we celebrate the holidays in the first place. Christmas is most chiefly about Christ. It's about his coming into this world to save us from our sin, from death, and from the power of the devil. It's about how in Christ God has given us hope for a new and better future – a new and better future that we can even now, by the power of his Holy Spirit, begin to experience and to enjoy. In sending you his Son, God had great hopes for you. And so, as we come upon the holiday season, you really should be hoping for the same things God has in mind for you.

And please understand that when I say *hope* in this context, I'm using a biblical definition of the word. We use hope in the sense of "Oh, wouldn't it be nice if it happens". There's a lot of uncertainty there. You don't know whether it will happen or not, but you want it to. When the Scriptures speak of hope, the sense is much more definite. There is no uncertainty. If you hope for something, you *know* it's going to happen; you just haven't seen it yet.

It's this kind of hope that the Apostle Paul is writing about in today's reading from his letter to the members of the Christian Church in Rome. He says, "Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might *have hope*." Got that? The Lord had the Bible written for one reason: to fill you with hope. He had the inspired writers put down his Words so that you, by hearing them, reading them, having them explained, and meditating on them, would be given the faith to endure the troubles of this present age, and the strengthening to look forward in confidence to a glorious future yet unseen. He wants you to have *hope*.

Hope for what? Well, in a general sense for your salvation, for the second coming of Jesus, for the resurrection of the dead, for a happy reunion with loved ones who died in the faith, for eternal life with them, and for the boundless joys of living in sinless perfection under Christ our King in the new heaven and earth. These are not pipe dreams. These are things that are going to happen. You will experience all of it together with everyone who shares the same hope.

That's a lot to hope for; but again, that's our *general* hope as Christians. In the immediate context, Paul has something else in the forefront to his mind: namely the hope we have *now* for living together in peaceful harmony as brothers and sisters in Christ sharing this same hope for the future. He says it this way: "May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that you may together with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore welcome [or receive] one another as Christ has received you, for the glory of God."

At this point a little background will be helpful. The Christian community at Rome was a tremendously mixed bag. Shared faith in Jesus was making some heretofore unheard-of bedfellows. You have to understand that the idea of the American melting pot had not yet been invented. And to be fair, if you haven't noticed, our experiment with it hasn't always worked out all that well. There's still plenty of tension between people of various ethnic backgrounds. Multiply that tension by a factor of 100 or so, and you'll have good idea about how things were back then in Rome.

Now, the main rift in the church was between Jewish believers and believers who were Gentiles, that is who had non-Jewish ethnic and religious roots. A lot of the former still thought of themselves as superior. "After all, we are of God's chosen people." And often they liked to highlight this perceived superiority by retaining a lot of the old covenant laws and traditions like circumcision and the dietary restrictions and what not. As you might guess, such airs and behaviors didn't exactly endear them to their fellow believers. Add to that the fact that the principal enemies of the church in those days were ethnic Jews who rejected Jesus as the Savior. "You think you're better than us because you're Jewish, but it's your own countrymen who are making our lives miserable. They're the ones who are falsely accusing and persecuting us. Stick that in your craw and chew on it, 'Mr. Superior'."

That was the biggest bone of contention – the friction between Jew and Gentile, but it also needs to be recognized that there were other divisions. First, it's a mistake to lump all Gentiles together. Rome was a big city that had communities of people from throughout the Empire: there were Romans, of course, but also Greeks, Egyptians, Mesopotamians, Syrians, Libyans, Gauls, Spaniards, to name but a few. In normal circumstances, they would have kept to themselves. You know how it is: those other people are hard to understand, they smell funny, they eat disgusting food, they wear weird clothes, they have strange habits; best to keep away from them. Add to that long histories of animosities and wars between these groups – not the least of which was that the Romans had conquered all these peoples and brought them under subjection by force of arms. They had all kinds of human reasons to hate, mistrust, and be on guard around each other. On top of it add the highly stratified social structure: Patricians and plebes, rich and poor, slave and free – all these widely disparate people being brought together in one Holy Communion by their shared faith and hope in Christ. We pretty much take it or granted now, but it was a crazy radical idea back then.

Paul writes to the Christians at Rome knowing that there are among them smoldering resentments, old hurts, perceived slights and insults, deep suspicions, and yes, actual sins that some of them have committed against others. Christians are sinners. It's what we do. And it's why we need a Savior. But the point is that *we have* a Savior in Jesus Christ, a Savior who loved us and carried our offenses to the cross where he suffered and died for them. And now he, risen from the dead, receives us with open arms and free forgiveness, all of our offenses wiped away and forgotten. In view of this, Paul says, receive one another as Christ has received you, for the glory of God. This is Paul's hope for the present. He expects the Christians at Rome to be of one mind, everyone there sharing the same hope in Christ,

everyone there welcoming and forgiving each other as the brothers and sisters – the members of Christ’s own body – that Christ has made them by forgiving their sins, giving them his Holy Spirit, and uniting them in the same holy faith. That was Paul’s hope for them. It was a hope that he wanted them to have too. And this is the hope for the holidays the Lord wants you to have as well.

It’s an especially good time to hope for it. The holidays tend to bring people together. You’re likely to be in the company of folks you haven’t seen for a while – some of whom you may not have parted with on good terms. But in a broader sense, there may be others you see on a regular basis with whom you are out of sorts. And maybe for very legitimate reasons: they hurt you, lied about you, insulted you, betrayed you, stole from you, put you in a bind—I don’t know. *It doesn’t matter.* Do you believe that Christ has freely forgiven your sins and received you into full fellowship? If so, you are called to forgive and to receive those who sinned against you in the same way. It’s not optional.

And I know: “That’s easy for you to say, Pastor; but you don’t know how I’ve suffered. You don’t know how much that person hurt me.” And it’s true: I don’t. But let’s see, did they put you up on false charges, beat you with their fists and spit on you, scourge the flesh off of your back, cram a crown of thorns down on your head, nail you to a cross, and then derisively laugh at you while you were slowly tortured to death? No? I didn’t think so. But you and your sins did that to Jesus. And he’s not holding it against you.

“Yeah, well, I’m not Jesus.” No. You’re not. He’s perfect. You aren’t. You’re a sinner. You haven’t got it in you to forgive like he does. But this is where the hope God gives us comes in. If you can’t forgive it’s because you need more forgiveness for yourself. Your lack of forgiveness, your unwillingness to let go of your claims against another person, is itself a soul-destroying sin for which you need to be forgiven. And if that’s where you find yourself (and I expect most if not all of us do), you need to repent. You need to receive Christ’s forgiveness – the forgiveness that he will very soon deliver to you from this very altar in his body and blood. And let me state this as clearly as I can: if you are not willing to recognize your lack of forgiveness as a sin and refuse to repent of it, if you want to remain in your sin and keep nursing the grudge you’re holding against someone, well, then don’t make a mockery of the Lord’s Supper and further endanger your soul by communing here despising the forgiveness of Christ that you neither want nor think you need.

I hope you won’t do that. My hope, like Paul’s, is that you will repent. My hope is that the God of hope will fill you with all joy and peace in believing in Jesus, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope – a hope that expects to see old rifts and divisions healed, relationships restored, and sins freely forgiven even as Christ has forgiven you. This is my hope for the holidays. I pray you make it yours too. And here’s the best part: You don’t have to wait for Christmas to arrive. Your faith in Christ makes every day a holiday, that is, a *holy day*; for he has made us his holy people and united us in one Holy Communion that together we may live in harmony as the Lord’s children and with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. May God grant it to us for his sake. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!