

MESSAGE OF HOPE IN THE AGE OF DESPAIR

(Sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Winfred B. Vergara, Officer of Episcopal Asiamerica Ministry, at the Chinese Convocation Gathering of Clergy and Lay Leaders held at Cathedral of St. Paul, Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles, California, January 25, 2010; the Feast of St. Paul)

Let us pray: Almighty and ever-living God, who through Your Son Jesus Christ, promised that You will be with us even unto the close of the age; and who through the Holy Spirit, presided over the ministry of the blessed apostles; we invoke your presence with us today as we gather in Christ's Name. We ask for your guidance, protection and blessing as we struggle with the issues and challenges of the times and as we lift up our needs and our hopes in you. We ask you to grant us listening ears and receptive hearts to what your Spirit is saying in our lives and to our ministries as your people and servants, in Jesus Name. Amen.

The age in which we live has been called many things: information age, atomic age, computer age, space age, post-Christian age, technological age, globalization age. Lately, one label which is being used more and more is "The Age of Despair." Certainly if we consider the current economic recession, the recent calamities in Haiti and in many parts of the world, the specter of terrorism and war, famine, pestilence and death, we find an increasing amount of pessimism and despair about the situation of humankind.

There are many people in this "Age of Despair" who are plagued by this feeling of hopelessness. There was a story of an immigrant who received a text from his son in Asia. The letter said, "Dad, we're in great need. Send money." The father text back, "Son, I was just laid off from my job and have no money to send. Tighten your belts." The son replied, "Dad, please send belts."

Another story was about a man who felt so much despair that he climbed up a bridge to commit suicide. A policeman climbed along and tried to coax him to come down but he would not. Finally in desperation, the policeman said "Okay, let's take ten minutes now. You take five minutes and tell me what's wrong with the world and why you want to kill yourself. Then I'll take five minutes and I tell you what is right with the world and why you should go on living." After each had taken five minutes, they joined hands---and jumped off the bridge---together!

As the church of Jesus Christ and as followers of the risen Lord, what is our mission to the world in this Age of Despair? How are we able to unleash the liberating power of the Gospel, the Good News of God in Jesus Christ so that people will have hope?

It is extremely important that we allow ourselves first to be comforted by the radiant hope of the people of God in the early church. It is important to be reminded that the beginning of the church was marked by an era of despair which became the backdrop by which Christian hope emerged.

In the time of Jesus birth, the socio-political and economic conditions of Israel were intolerable. Fifty percent of the people were slaves; most of them were hungry. Those who had jobs were paying 50 percent of their income in taxes to Imperial Rome. There were constant rebellion and uprising mostly advocating abolition of exorbitant taxes. At the time when Jesus was a child, two thousand Jewish men involved in rebellion were nailed to the cross, with the crosses strung along the road to Galilee.

At the crucifixion and death of Jesus, the apostles scattered in fear of the Jews and in despair of what happened. After the resurrection, new hope emerged. The promised Holy Spirit came down at Pentecost and the era of Church growth began. But when the Church was rapidly advancing, persecutions of Christians followed. During the reign of Emperor Nero, thousands of Christians were executed, stoned to death, hanged on the cross, beheaded and fed to the lions. Yet when you read the New Testament, the Book of Acts, the Letters of Paul, of Peter, of James and the Book of Revelation, the whole New Testament is bursting with hope. "Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice!" St. Paul said. "Have no anxiety for anything but in everything by prayer and supplication, make you request known to God." That was quite an advice from one who first persecuted the Christians, converted to Christ and became missionary par excellence.

The lives of the early Christians were no less hard and difficult than ours, but when we consider their behavior from the scriptures, they were filled with hope and expectation. "The joy of the Lord is my strength. "This is the day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it." What makes them incorrigibly hopeful despite their situations?

First, it was the quality of their faith. Jesus said, "If you have faith as small as the mustard seed, you can say to this mountain move and it will move." The Book of Hebrews defined faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. The early Christians looked to God as the source of life and the hope of the future. "Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever. " In the midst of changes and chances in the world, God remains forever. God's mercy and love and faithfulness never change. The same sun that sets in the west in the evening will be the same sun that will rise on the east.

Second, it is the quality of their witness. St. Paul reminded his student, Timothy: "preach the word, be urgent in season or out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, be unailing in your witness. Do the work of an evangelist." By the quality of the life that they lived and the relationships that they created, the early Christians bore witness to the world, with love because where there is great love, there will be great miracles. Love is what the world needs in an age of greed and unbelief, in an age of conflicts and ruptured relationships. They believed that God so loved the world that He gave His only Son; that God came into the world not to condemn the world but that the world maybe saved through him. They believed that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself and that He has entrusted to the Church, the Body of Christ, this ministry of reconciliation.

Thirdly and finally, the role of good deeds in the proclamation of the Good News. Jesus said, "Let your light so shine before all people that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven." The role of good works is to point to God in whom we live and move and have our being. Good works by Christians, with all good intentions are not enough until they are motivated by the love and compassion of Christ. We have seen so many social actions aimed at alleviating the poor and the oppressed. We have seen so much advancement in human science and technology that solved age old problems. But in the final analysis, we still see the abject human condition and intolerable human sufferings. And even those who are generous givers are experiencing what is called "donor fatigue." The Bible says, "Without God all who labor, labor in vain." Only in Christ can we find good works sanctified.

The message of hope is a divine-human cooperation. A story is told of a boy who found a piece of land full of weeds and dirt. Moved by a sense of mission, he cleaned the ground, throw away the garbage,

cultivated the soil and planted flowering plants on that piece of land. As the plants grew and bore flowers, it was a beautiful sight to behold. One day, as he was watering the plants, a pastor passed by and said, "Young man, what a beautiful garden you and God have made together." The boy replied, "Thank you, Pastor, but you should have seen it when it was left to God alone."

Was it Mother Teresa who said that God works through us? Christ does not hands but our hands; no feet but our feet; no mouth but our mouths. We are the Body of Christ. We are entrusted by God, directed by the Godhead and empowered by the Holy Spirit to advance the Kingdom, the reign of God, by loving and serving our neighbors, by going into the world to preach the gospel by words and deeds.

The New Testament Church proclaimed the Christian hope in the Age of Despair. They proclaimed Jesus as the hope that springs eternal; they proclaimed Jesus as the hope that shall never fade away and no darkness can overcome. May we, as the Church of the same Jesus Christ, proclaim the same hope with the same standard of faith, of witness and good works?

We gather today as Asians and Asian Americans who have come to this country filled with hope and expectancy. The phrase "The American Dream" has appealed to us because it is a promise of hope, a promise of abundance, a promise of the good life. This promise, however, should go beyond materialism, for it is, then it will simply become fleeting, temporary and doomed. The prophet Isaiah said, "All people are like grasses and their deeds are like flowers in the field. The grass withers, the flower falls, but only the Word of God remains forever." And so we must let this human hope connect with the hope in Christ. For in the final analysis, God alone can truly answer our most intimate human needs; God alone can truly mend our broken hearts; God alone can wipe the tears from our eyes and God alone can give us the hope of abundant life on earth and eternal life in heaven.

It is therefore my prayer that we shall continue and remain steadfast in proclaiming this hope, this hope in Christ. Christ is our hope, Christ is the hope of the world; the hope that shall never fade away. I know that many of you came here today hoping to find new answers to new problems and even to age-old problems. My own answer is the same as that of St. Paul, of Mother Teresa, and all the Christians who have put on the death and the life of Christ. Christ is the answer---and I pray that---after all is said and done in this meeting, we shall go back and proclaim Jesus as the hope of the church and of the world in this age of despair. Let us turn despair to hope by clinging all the more to the Hope in Christ.

You have come to this gathering with hope and I challenge you, after you have heard and received this hope; go back home to preach ----preach, preach, preach! Preach Hope! It is when you preach hope that renewal comes and your people and the whole world will likewise be renewed. Amen.