

Challenges to A Living Hope

1Peter 1:3-9

June 30, 2011

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

And because of his resurrection we have an ***inheritance that Peter says is imperishable, locked securely within God's dimension*** that bible calls heaven. This is far removed from the conventional notions about heaven as villas earmarked for the faithful in the next life. What is certain is it's a guaranteed future because of what Jesus has accomplished. This is our living hope for the future.

Listening to Peter, the first bishop of Rome, we learn the importance of hope for us living at the beginning of the 21st century. It's often difficult to manufacture hope in the face of the complex and sometimes dark problems we have. The West seems to be far along the path toward a kind of soulless materialism. Morality, solidarity with our neighbour seems to be values that are rapidly disappearing from our common life in the West.

We often use that phrase, "hopeless". I feel "hopeless" when I look at the future; life is "hopeless" for me today. By this word, "hopeless" we mean that hope has been drained from the situation. So many people today feel hopeless in the face of life's vicissitudes. Our sense of emptiness, the fear that grips so many in our society over the instability of our world, our growing moral bankruptcy, our addictions, our materialism, our self absorption: these have left many in our society feeling "hopeless".

In the film **Pirates of the Caribbean** the pirates have been cursed since they found the Aztec gold because the heathen gods placed upon the gold a terrible curse. Any mortal that removed but a single piece from that stone chest was cursed for eternity. Captain Barbossa and his men took it, spent it, but the more they spent the more they came to realize that nothing could satisfy them any more. He tells the

beautiful Elizabeth that they are cursed men who were compelled by greed, but now are consumed by it. Indeed they are cursed to be the living dead as they are but shadows of men. In the moonlight they appear as ghastly skeletons. No food, no drink has any taste to them; no longer can they feel the wind off the ocean. Their humanity has been lost until such time as they can find a blood sacrifice to take away the curse.

Barbossa thinks that the perfect sacrifice has been found in the beautiful Elizabeth. He says to the men with the knife poised to strike, ***Gentlemen, the time has come! Our salvation is nigh! Our torment is near at end. And who among us has paid the blood sacrifice owed to the heathen gods?*** The pirates respond, ***Us!*** Barbossa then asks: ***And whose blood must yet be paid?*** They respond, ***Hers!*** He takes up the knife to draw the blood of Elizabeth and says ***Begun by blood...by blood undone.*** Unfortunately they discover they have the wrong sacrifice for her blood doesn't lift the curse.

Jesus, however, has through his life, death and resurrection restored our relationship with God. With Adam we lived under the curse of sin that left us homeless and lost. The real curse for us is not the Aztec Gold that we lusted after. It's the separation from God. Paul in his letters uses similar language to describe this transformation.

Paul says to the Christians in Thessalonica: *...how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven whom he raised from the dead...*(1Thes. 1:9ff)

When I became a Christian I wrote home to my aunt in Scotland to let her know about my newfound faith in God. To my horror she had very little sympathy for my faith and wrote back rather stern letters letting me know that I had made a bad choice. She actually encouraged me to return to my former way of life. And I must say that most of my family found my choice to follow Christ to be rather odd. One could interpret their silence, or in the case of my aunt, open hostility, as me letting the family down somehow. I must confess that there have been times when I wished that I could be seen as one of the family who remained true to the family beliefs. But it simply wasn't possible to ignore the transformation Christ brought into my life.

Why is this relevant for us today? I would suggest that our present standing in society is becoming increasingly similar to that of these early communities of faith. The church today stands on the fringe of society's power grid. We are far from our former power and prestige. No longer are we needed to sanction the political, cultural and social events with our presence. It is the majority opinion today that faith in God is irrelevant to life in the 21st century. Hence to be a Christian today is to be a resident alien. We are on the outside: tolerated, smiled at, sympathized with occasionally, but more commonly simply ignored. This presents a huge test for us every day. It's natural to want to belong. But on so many issues we simply live to the beat of a different drummer.

In the meanwhile we, like these early Christian communities, suffer various trials. The Message translates it like this:

I know how great this makes you feel, even though you have to put up with every kind of aggravation in the meantime, Pure gold put in the fire comes out of it proved pure; genuine faith put through this suffering comes out proved genuine. When Jesus wraps this all up, it's your faith, not your gold, that God will have on display as evidence of his victory...(1Peter 1:6)

Peter writes that the trials we face will be a test of our faith to determine whether or not it is genuine. These trials are not sent by God necessarily to test us but often are simply part and parcel of the human condition: health issues, family tensions, disappointments, relationship breakdowns, employment and financial uncertainties, and a host of other things that we all experience.

Within a few months of becoming a Christian I lost my job. I remember how that raised all kinds of questions for me as a new Christian. Surely, I thought, God would look after me and not allow this to happen. I have learned since then hopefully that our faith doesn't protect us from life's vicissitudes. But Peter's point is that out of our personal and community ordeals our faith will be strengthened and purified. These are some of the benefits of this amazing living hope offers us as resident aliens in society.

Faith in Christ, his life, death and resurrection, is the basis of our hope. We believe that our future, as well as our present, is in God's hands. We believe that, unlike the poor pirates who discovered that the gold turned to ash in their mouths, our faith has connected us to a living hope and a genuine sense of meaning and purpose in life. Faith won't diminish us; it will enlarge us. Faith won't dampen our lives; it brings true joy and meaning into our lives. Faith won't cut us off from life; it connects us to our true home that is in God who made us.

Is the faith you have a "living faith" ? We sing:

*Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?
Will you go where you don't know and never be the same?
Will you let my love be shown? Will you let my name be known,
will you let my life be grown in you and you in me?*

*Lord your summons echoes true when you but call my name.
Let me turn and follow you and never be the same.
In Your company I'll go where Your love and footsteps show.
Thus I'll move and live and grow in you and you in me.*

Amen