

Christ Church Sermons

The Last Sunday after Pentecost, November 25, 2007

Feast of Christ the King

The Reverend Dr. Winston B. Charles

Jeremiah 23:1-6; Psalm 46; Colossians 1:11-20

Luke 23:33-43

Hope for the Church; Hope of the Church

"May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from God's glorious power." (Colossians 1:11)

I have been routing for the Philadelphia Phillies baseball team since I was a very young boy, lying on the floor of our living room with my brother on Saturday afternoon, watching the Game of the Week with Dizzy Dean as color commentator yelling, "He slud into second base."

In the fifties the Phillies had a great young team called the Whiz Kids. The long-ball hitting third baseman on that famed 1950 pennant-winning team was a guy by the name of Willie "Puddin' Head" Jones, who was born in Dillon, South Carolina, just "south of the border," grew up outside Bennettsville, my home town, and was finally buried in Laurinburg. When the team rode the train to Florida for spring training, occasionally they would stop in Bennettsville and play an exhibition game. Although I never saw one of these games, the spirit of the Phillies was in the air that I breathed as a child.

This summer on a baseball pilgrimage with Judy's brother and his two young sons I finally got to see my long-loved Phillies play in their home stadium. Ah, how sweet it was! A few days after I saw them, the New York Times reported that the Phillies had become the first professional team to lose 10,000 games! When they won their division this year, I was so hoping that they would go to the World Series. How wonderful it would have been to win the World Series in the same year they lost their 10,000th game! But alas, they lost to the Colorado Rockies. Well, hope springs eternal!

Or does it? How does hope spring eternal? Let's think about that all too familiar phrase that we toss around like a baseball in outfield warm-up practice. Usually, we throw off, "Well, hope springs eternal" as a phrase of resignation that we lost this one but maybe, perhaps, there is a chance we might win one for the Gipper in some uncertain future.

But, our lives on this earth need a different kind of hope, a heartier, more vital and trustworthy hope, a hope that is so much more than wishful thinking. We need a hope that is indeed eternal at its source as well as at its end.

Alexander Pope, who originated this familiar phrase in his *Essay on Man*, points the way toward a right understanding, for his hope that "springs eternal in the human breast" has God as its source and God as its end. We need hope as strong a bootleg whisky that can sustain us when confronted by failure or tragedy or illness or despair or even death. This hope cannot rest on wishful thinking or even on mere human intention but must find its source and end in God.

Where do we find this hope? Here is the role and place of church. God has established the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church to be the receptacle, the reservoir, of hope eternal, of hope stronger than death, of hope that raises our spirits from the dead giving to us a vision and understanding of life that draws forth the power and creativity and compassion and courage that resides in the human breast.

For this hope to be effective in the world, to change the world for the good, it needs human beings to live it, to incarnate it, to embody it, to express it in their lives. But, the source of this "hope that springs eternal from the human breast" is always and forever God. God is the giver; we are the receiver. God is the source; we are the implementers. God is the end; we are the visionaries. The church is the reservoir of hope of which we drink deeply.

Whenever I speak of the Holy Eucharist with new members, I seek to explain how we Episcopalians understand what goes on at our altar when we consecrate bread and wine and come forth with hands extended to receive the body and blood of Christ. I explain that some denominations believe that God is present in each person's heart as they hear what God has done in Christ, and so do we believe and experience. As they and we recall the Last Supper, the crucifixion, the resurrection and all that these mean about God's present power in our lives, our hearts are strangely warmed with the presence of the Holy Spirit of the Risen Christ.

And, I tell these new members, we go a step further. For, we in the Episcopal Church affirm that not only is God present subjectively in our hearts but also, as Jesus promised at that Last Supper, the Risen Christ comes to us through the consecrated bread and wine whether we are receptive or not, whether we are worthy or not, whether we are aware or not.

In this, God in Christ is the primary actor, the source and the end of our Eucharistic celebration. The blessing of the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace rests first and foremost on God's own action on our behalf so that we can more and more understand and receive the fullness of God's love for us and for the whole world. Then, as recipients, we step down from the altar, incorporate this blessing into our hearts and lives, and carry it out into the world, becoming the church for the world.

Why is this understanding of the sacrament important? It reflects the model, the paradigm, of how God in Christ always comes to us first and foremost and how we always first receive and then share with others what we have. As Paul proclaims in Romans, "...God proves his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8) God always takes the initiative. We cannot save ourselves. This is not to say that we have no part in "working out our salvation"; we have a tremendous and necessary part to play in healing ourselves and the world. But, it is to say, our

success in being fully human, in facing all that life throws at us, in living into the fullness of who we are, in realizing that each and every one of us has an essential role to play in the ever-unfolding reconciling work of God for the world, our success in all of this rests absolutely in the realization that God is forever taking the initiative, reaching out to us in Christ Jesus to heal, to reconcile, to empower, to love, to instill hope that springs eternal in the human breast.

The Church, with its proclamation of the living word and its sacraments of the Risen Christ is the reservoir of God's eternal hope. Parched by despair, by confusion, by fear, by hurt? Come and drink deeply of the chalice of God's eternal hope for us. Unworthy? Unprepared? Clueless? Afraid? No matter. For as we come to the church, which is the body of the Risen Christ, God takes the initiative and comes to us just as we are to embrace and forgive and heal and empower. Come and drink deeply of the chalice of God's eternal hope.

The Church holds, proclaims and shares the hope that comes from God. Through the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist, through funerals and weddings, confirmations and ordinations, through the Living Word read and proclaimed in worship and preaching and teachings, through the care and concern given by Stephen Ministers, pastoral visitors, Eucharistic visitors, loving friends, through the welcoming of strangers and visitors, through Saint Saviour's Center, Wake Relief, Habitat for Humanity, compassionate outreach of all kinds, through children and youth, through occasions of quiet fellowship and joyous celebrations, through the lives that each of us live in the world, through all of this and so much more, the Church, the body of Christ, dispenses the eternal hope that comes from God.

God is the source and end of hope. The Church is the recipient and dispenser of this eternal hope that continually flows from the heart of God to the heart of the church to the heart of all who drink deeply of this abundance.

What is the hope for the church? It is quite simply the hope of God, received and shared and lived. As long as we the church clearly and consistently come to God to receive through word and sacraments the hope eternal and clearly and consistently proclaim and share and live out that hope for the world, for all people no matter who they are, then we as the church will survive and thrive, for our life-blood comes from worshipping God in truth and beauty and being God's hands and feet and arms in the world.

May we keep in our minds and hearts the key thought of our hymn for this sermon series: "All our hope on God is founded..." Returning again and again to this basic understanding brings us repeatedly and consistently into God's presence, which provides the firm foundation on which we meet all that life gives us and through which we become all that God wants us to be.

"May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from God's glorious power."

As for the Phillies—there is always next year! Hope springs eternal!