

## THE CHOICE OF HOPE

It's a bold statement to say that Hope is a choice! It would be so much at odds with the flood of information that hits our screens and newspapers every day, and even with the many rumours that are circulating: let's look at the situation in Ukraine, Palestine, Sudan... and those little latent wars that regularly wake up, and with which some of us are familiar. The political situation is just as worrying, even in countries that until now have enjoyed a degree of stability thanks to a tried and tested democratic system. Heads of state elected with complete transparency are hiding or revealing intentions worthy of great dictators. The world of money is becoming the world of power. And our Church has not been spared either! On a personal level, we can face the challenge of age, retirement, difficulties with work and housing, isolation and the high cost of living. All good reasons to despair about the future and even the present.

But is this really unique to our time? A few weeks ago we celebrated the birth of Jesus our Saviour. Many dangers were already hovering over the cot visited by the shepherds - men more or less marginalised because of their profession - also visited by these wise strangers who had come from afar. And now King Herod is already going to attack the baby Jesus, for fear that he will take his place. After being forced to go to Bethlehem for the census, the family from Nazareth was forced into exile until the tyrant's death. The situation in Palestine was not a happy one: the Roman occupiers made harsh demands on the people. The religious authorities, in the hands of a large priestly family, pressurised the little people by imposing impossible practices. Corruption was rife on both the side of the occupiers and the occupied.

And Jesus was to live 30 years in these conditions in Nazareth, in total incognito, the simplicity of an ordinary life, to the rhythm of the seasons and religious festivals. Until the day when, moved by the Spirit, he emerged from this anonymity and declared in his village synagogue:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, 19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."* Lk 4:18-19.

Taking up a prophecy from Isaiah (61:1-2), he has just lit the beautiful flame of Hope in his distressed world. But in the end he is rejected by the people of his

own village, who do not take seriously this impromptu preacher that everyone thinks they know.

Have times changed that much? What happened in Palestine is still happening in our world.

## **THE JUBILEE: 'A YEAR OF THE LORD'S FAVOUR'**

If I have chosen to begin these lines with a rather pessimistic vision, it is to show that Hope is not an easy choice, but that it is rooted in the very life of Jesus from the very first moments of his earthly existence. What he came to bring to the world was a great breath capable of renewing it, but also of founding a community that would take over his mission. This chain of transmission of Hope has not stopped with us. Jesus announced '*a year of the Lord's favour*'. And now we have entered a 'Jubilee Year', symbolically signified by the opening of one of the doors of the Basilicas in Rome and around the world reserved for this purpose. Pope Francis is inviting us to become 'Pilgrims of Hope'.

*"Everyone knows what it is to hope. In the heart of each person, hope dwells as the desire and expectation of good things to come, despite our not knowing what the future may bring. Even so, uncertainty about the future may at times give rise to conflicting feelings, ranging from confident trust to apprehensiveness, from serenity to anxiety, from firm conviction to hesitation and doubt. Often we come across people who are discouraged, pessimistic and cynical about the future, as if nothing could possibly bring them happiness. For all of us, may the Jubilee be an opportunity to be renewed in hope. God's word helps us find reasons for that hope."* ("Hope does not disappoint" No. 1)

We have therefore been invited to go through this door, to become 'Pilgrims of Hope', to rekindle this little flame that may be flickering: it is the very Spirit of the Lord within us. If we haven't already done so, let's take the step - it's always the first that costs. We may hesitate, as if this invitation were an illusion. Think of the disciples on the road to Emmaus returning from Jerusalem on the evening of Jesus' resurrection: *"But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel."* (Lk 24:21). Their eyes were turned towards despair and death, while Jesus himself was in their midst. It was at the breaking of the bread that their eyes were opened: the sign of this sharing was enough to awaken their faith. And the two pilgrims returned to Jerusalem to tell their companions the good news.

If our hope is put to the test, let us open our eyes. Is Christ not on the road with us?

## HOPE, BELIEVE, LOVE.

But what is hope? On what can we base our hope? Faith, hope and love are inseparable triplets. They cannot live one without the other two, even if they do not have quite the same face. They are sisters because the same blood flows in their veins: the blood of Jesus, who gave his life for us and for the scattered children of God.

*"Hope" writes Pope Francis "is born of love and based on the love springing from the pierced heart of Jesus upon the cross: "For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life" (Rom 5:19). That life becomes manifest in our own life of faith, which begins with Baptism, develops in openness to God's grace and is enlivened by a hope constantly renewed and confirmed by the working of the Holy Spirit. (3).*

Hope is born of faith in Jesus, nourished by the love that springs from his pierced Heart. Pope Francis quotes Paul's letter to the Romans (2): *" ... we boast in our hope of sharing in the glory of God... Hope does not disappoint, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Rom 5:1-2.5)*

Believing awakens us to the Christian life; we have made the choice, and we make it again at key moments in our lives. Faith is a solid foundation that supports the other two. It is Faith that opens us to Hope and allows us to walk through the door, making us 'Pilgrims of Hope'.

*"Pilgrimage is of course a fundamental element of every Jubilee event. Setting out on a journey is traditionally associated with our human quest for meaning in life." (5)*

Hoping, believing and loving give meaning to our existence, and we see all around us that our world is lacking in meaning, and sometimes seeks to fill this gap with temporary artifices. How can we put this into practice in our lives?

## FLESH OUT OUR HOPE.

Hope needs to take flesh in our lives and cannot leave us in the clouds as if it were just a dream. And that can only happen by coming out of ourselves. Jesus proclaimed the Good News of the Kingdom of God, but he put his words into action: healing the sick, forgiving sinners, putting desperate people back on their feet by offering them a future. This was his project in the synagogue of Nazareth, and his whole public life was its development. The apostle Peter said

of him in a few words: *'He went about doing good'* (Acts 10:38). Brother Charles, unable to proclaim the Gospel with his words, followed this path by choosing the pastoral ministry of kindness. And this goodness is within our reach, as Pope Francis reiterates:

*"For this reason, the Apostle Paul encourages us to "rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, and persevere in prayer" (Rom 12:12). Surely we need to "abound in hope" (cf. Rom 15:13), so that we may bear credible and attractive witness to the faith and love that dwell in our hearts; that our faith may be joyful and our charity enthusiastic; and that each of us may be able to offer a smile, a small gesture of friendship, a kind look, a ready ear, a good deed, in the knowledge that, in the Spirit of Jesus, these can become, for those who receive them, rich seeds of hope."* (18)

A few days ago, in this month of January, I found it hard to really get back to work in the face of the news I shared with you at the beginning of this post. What's more, it was a Monday, after the festive season, and I was stuck in front of my computer: blank page syndrome! And I had to get on with this work on Hope. So I left my office and went to visit an old friend of mine, just as old as me, who had worked a lot in show business and had retired not far from my community. He has gone blind and lives in a small room on the 6th floor of a flat without a lift. He goes downstairs every morning to go to mass in a nearby church, does his shopping, prepares his only meal of the day... In short, I went to see him. He's in the dark, sometimes cold, alone. I thought I was bringing him some comfort, but it was he who, thanks to his serenity, his inner peace, his faith, his hope that the Lord will come and get him one day, comforted me. And I returned home, won over by the quiet grace that emanates from this man.

*"The image of the anchor is eloquent; it helps us to recognize the stability and security that is ours amid the troubled waters of this life, provided we entrust ourselves to the Lord Jesus. The storms that buffet us will never prevail, for we are firmly anchored in the hope born of grace, which enables us to live in Christ and to overcome sin, fear and death. This hope, which transcends life's fleeting pleasures and the achievement of our immediate goals, makes us rise above our trials and difficulties, and inspires us to keep pressing forward, never losing sight of the grandeur of the heavenly goal to which we have been called."* (Pope Francis. N°25)

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+Claude Rault.