

2nd Sunday of Advent – Homily by Fr. Dan Donovan (December 4, 2011)

The word **advent** means a **coming or an arrival**. The liturgy during the Advent season evokes the **threefold coming of Christ**, his coming as one like ourselves two thousand years ago, his coming in glory at the end of time, and his coming here and now into our hearts and into our world.

Advent is a time of longing and of expectation. It is, in a very special way, a **season of hope**. The three biblical figures who come back a number of times in the Advent liturgy are all people of hope - **Isaiah** and, with him, the great prophetic tradition of Israel; **Mary**, the expectant mother; and **John the Baptist** whose preaching marks the beginning of the public life of Jesus.

Although **hope** obviously comes in many forms, what is most distinctive about biblical hope is its focus on God; he is the rock on which it leans, the anchor that prevents it from being set adrift even in the worst of storms. This kind of hope is rooted in faith and finds expression in trust. Because we have come to know God through faith as a God of liberation and salvation, as a God who cares, we trust in the gracious nature of his continuing presence to us and to our world.

As explicitly religious as hope can be, it takes other forms as well. It is something that everyone experiences to one degree or another. Hope enables us to get up in the morning and go to work, to accept and fulfill our responsibilities, to keep on living no matter how great the challenges that confront us. **Hope is essential** for almost all forms of activity. We do things in the hope of achieving some good or other; we do them, for example, to find a job, get a raise, develop a friendship, learn a skill, be able to provide our family with something out of the ordinary. If we become convinced that these or of any other goals we have are impossible, we abandon any effort to pursue them. In losing hope, we lose our motivation for acting.

A little more than a year ago people around the world were captivated by an extraordinary story of hope. I am thinking of the ordeal of the **33 miners in Chile** who suddenly found themselves trapped 700 meters under the ground. For 16 days they had absolutely no contact with the surface. Had they not continued to hope, they would have had a hard time surviving that long.

A new kind of hope was required as the slow and delicate process of tunneling down to meet them dragged on. Hope was also crucial for those on the surface, for their families first of all but also for those working to effect their rescue.

Sometimes our hopes are unrealistic. One sometimes sees this with young people coming to the university. They would love to be a first rate scientist or a professional musician but simply don't have the natural ability required. Even here, however, although hope for one thing is dashed, hope itself is not destroyed. It soon finds another object on which to focus.

Serious illness can be an enormous challenge to hope. On hearing the results of a particular test, we hope that it may be wrong, or at the least that our condition will turn out to be less serious than we have been told. When we discover that it isn't, our hope shifts to effective medicine or a successful operation. Often, such hopes are realized. Sometimes, however, they are not. At such times we may turn to God and to prayer and hope for a cure or at least for the courage and the inner strength to accept what cannot be changed and for the peace and trust that come from a sense of God's presence with us.

Hope in all its forms needs to be nourished. This is certainly true in regard to God and the ultimate meaningfulness of our lives. Both the Old and the New Testaments emphasize the importance of memory in this regard. The psalms as well as many other passages in the Bible remind us of the things that God has done in the past and of how in doing them he has revealed himself as a God of mercy and compassion, a God who is near to us and who wills our ultimate well-being. Christian memory is focused in a special way on the life and teaching, the person and destiny of Jesus. John's gospel tells us that God so loved the world that he sent his only Son and that the Son so loved us that he gave himself for our salvation.

As believers, our ultimate hope is for eternal life, for life in God. Such hope, however, is

inseparable from all the other forms of hope that are woven into our lives. If God is, as we believe, the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end, the creator and goal of all that is, then our lives and our efforts to live them well and to make a difference in the world are not meaningless or condemned to final futility.

Our faith gives us every right to hope that the routine and not so routine things that make up the pattern of our daily life - an act of kindness to a neighbour or a stranger, encouragement to those who are struggling, the faithful fulfillment of responsibilities whether at home or at work - that these and similar things are worthwhile, that they build us up and contribute to the well-being of others.

Hope is not the same thing as a naturally optimistic disposition. Nor does it always come easily. It is the fruit of experience and thought and ultimately of faith. The deepest and strongest kind of hope is the **hope that knows itself to be rooted in God**. Such a hope can and is meant to permeate all aspects of our being. It is meant to help us become **people of hope**.