

The Church (3) - as a community of hope

(St Andrew's Church, St Andrews, 8 November 1998)

(Readings: Luke 20:27-38, 2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17)

I am tempted to think that the Archbishop of York heard reports of my sermons on the last two Sunday mornings. At any rate, he is reported as saying something that can serve as a summary of what I was trying to say in those first two of the three sermons I am preaching on what it means to be the church. Last week he said that a 'dull, pedestrian, committee-bound, utilitarian view of the church' was 'hardly likely to inspire or to convert anyone,' and called instead for a vision of the church as 'a divine society... truly a home for sinners and a school for saints.' Two weeks ago I talked about the church as a home for sinners, a community of those who are all forgiven sinners, and last week about the church as a school for saints, a community in which all of us are saints. In the church - differently from how people tend to think outside the church - in the church the sinners and the saints are not two different categories. None of us ever cease to be forgiven sinners. Saints are forgiven sinners, and even in heaven when we shall no longer sin, we shall always be those who can be there only because God has put our sin behind us and opened a new future to us. But also, forgiven sinners, from the moment they know themselves to be forgiven sinners, are also saints, dedicated to God, living already in that new future that God promises his saints.

A home for sinners and a school for saints. What does that leave to be said about the church? A great deal, but today, taking as I have done on the last two Sundays my cue from our Bible readings, I want to focus on that future dimension of the church that I've already mentioned: the church as a community of hope, a community with a future, a community whose future is the future of God's whole creation, a community which is the beginning of God's new creation of all things, the vanguard of the coming kingdom of God. The church is the people God has called to live in the present with a view to that future when God will rescue his creation from all evil and suffering, raise the dead to eternal life and take his whole creation into the eternity of his own life. The church is the people who expect that of God and live by that hope. That's one of the things that should make us distinctive in the world. We have a hope for ourselves and for the world that cannot be had except in knowing the God of Jesus Christ. In Ephesians Paul describes his readers' past, before they became Christians, as 'without Christ, without hope and without God.' God, Christ and hope belong together, and the church is where that should be clear for all to see.

But what do I mean by hope, what does Paul mean by hope in this context? One thing that Christian hope is not is a calculation of the probabilities of what may happen. It is not like the weather forecast or the chancellor's predictions for the economy or the best computer predictions of the damage global warming will be doing in the next few years. But nor is it optimism, if that means a kind of temperamental tendency to feel that things will usually turn out for the best. I find it quite easy to distinguish Christian hope from optimism because I am naturally a rather pessimistic person. (Of course, I tend to regard my pessimism as realism.) I will usually read the signs negatively. When I think about the future of the Christian church in our western society, it seems to me very bleak in the short-term. I think the

church is virtually bound to become an increasingly marginalized minority in a deeply hostile culture, and I doubt whether the church is really prepared for that role. When I think about the future of the world, I tend to even greater pessimism. I do not see how it is possible for the world to make the kind of radical changes that alone will avert global ecological catastrophe. I know I may be wrong about these things. But the point I want to make is that Christian hope is something else: not a calculation of probabilities, not a temperamental inclination to look on the bright side, but trusting God's promises that, in spite of and beyond the worst that may happen, God will fulfil his purposes for his world. This is hoping against hope, as we say. It is hope that has no basis other than God, which is to say it has the only basis that can in the end be reliable. Evil may do its worst - we have no basis for denying it may - but God is always greater, and both proximately and ultimately God will bring good out of evil, restore what is lost, repair what is spoiled, and awaken the dead. That's why Paul in our passage from 2 Thessalonians can entertain the bleakest of expectations, evil let loose in the world in unprecedented form, but nevertheless insist that it is the *hope* God has given his readers that should sustain them in their Christian lives.

The real test of any kind of hope is death. Death is the great enemy of hope. In the face of death even the most modest of hopes are fragile and vulnerable: death may carry us off before they can be realized. Death makes everything transient. Even if we are content to hope not for ourselves but for future generations, ultimately all such hopes founder in the face of death as the universal fate of all things. There will not be a human race for ever. Everything in this creation is transient and mortal in the end. Everything comes to nothing in the end. It seems that death has the last word. Death always has the trump card in the game it plays with human hopes. Unless, that is, hope has its basis beyond this transient and mortal world, a basis in God, who is eternal life in himself, who creates life and can give life beyond death and beyond the reach of death. This requires nothing less than a new creation of all things, God's taking of his creation out of transience and death into his own eternal life. But this is what our God has promised, and it is the only kind of hope that can endure and surmount the contradiction which death poses to every form of hope. Ultimately all other hopes founder, but this ultimate hope for God's victory over death sustains all lesser hopes with it.

Let's turn to our Gospel reading. The Sadducees, virtually the only Jewish group in the time of Jesus who did not believe in resurrection, have a clever question to trick Jesus with. A woman who marries in turn all of seven brothers. Whose wife will she be in the resurrection? The question is cleverly posed because it depends on the Jewish law that if a man died without children his brother was obliged to marry the widow. So Jesus cannot say that only one man really had a right to consider the woman his wife. All were fulfilling a legal obligation in marrying her. But the question misconceives what resurrection means, says Jesus. It is not a matter of being restored to a life just like this one, in which people marry. After the resurrection people will be like the angels, who do not marry.

I have encountered people who find this response by Jesus rather distressing. Their marriage relationship is one of the best things in their life. Are they to lose it in the resurrection? Will we no longer to be related to each other in love and affection? I think the answer to that is to notice that Jesus is here considering marriage only as the context for having and raising children. That is what the Sadducees question was about, since the brothers' duty to marry the widow was in order to raise heirs for her

first husband. Jesus is saying no more than that there will be no procreation in the next world. Procreation only makes sense in a world where people die. In the resurrection people will no longer be subject to death. What will happen to our relationships, marriage relationships and others? All we can say is to apply the golden rule for thinking about the new creation: it will in every way surpass this creation. We shall lose nothing of value, but enjoy everything of value all the more. If our relationships will no longer be marriage or parenthood or friendship as we know these things now, that is because they will be more than those things, not less; better, not worse. In part that will be because the shadow death casts over all our relationships in this life will be gone. And it follows - quite importantly - that we can already begin to defy that shadow, knowing it will not last.

I shall come back to that point in a moment, but notice first what Jesus says at the end of this passage when he offers the Sadducees a reason for believing in resurrection. It is that God is not the God of the dead, but of the living. The hope of resurrection has its only adequate basis in God, in the kind of God we know God to be. It has its basis in the fact that God values us, just as he also values the rest of his creation. As God's creation we are not a sort of throwaway artifact with built-in obsolescence, something God enjoys for a while but then goes on to something newer and better. God loves us. God cannot desire what he loves and values finally to perish. God is God of the living, not of the dead. If God is our God, if God has not only created but also redeemed us, we must be eternally the living, not the dead.

So death is what creation left to itself comes to. Left to itself it can only sink back into the nothingness from which God created it. But in God's redeeming love he does not leave creation finally to itself. He takes us into that inseparable union with his own eternal life that means for us an inconceivably different form of life no longer subject to death.

Of course, since Jesus spoke those words God has shown himself to be the God of the living, not of the dead, by raising Jesus himself from death. In the resurrection of Jesus God has already played his trump card against death. Because Jesus has been raised, we too will most certainly be raised. So when Paul talks about the Christian hope, he talks not only about God but also about Jesus: God called us, he says in our reading from 2 Thessalonians, so that we might come to possess the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

But, finally, isn't this kind of hope exactly what Christians have all too often been criticized for: hope for another life in another world that distracts us from this life? Isn't it just a dreaming of the hereafter when we should be occupied with the here and now, with all that needs to be done to give people a decent life before death? Doesn't it make Christians, as someone said, too heavenly minded to be any earthly use? I think actually quite the opposite. Christian hope is not for another world but for the redemption of this world from evil and suffering and death. To see people as destined not to perish in death but to live in God forever is to recognize their value and to treat them accordingly. To see the world as open to new creation by God is to recognize its value for God and to treat it accordingly. This is not a throwaway creation, people are not throwaway creations, they really do have the value we recognize when we love someone deeply and cannot bear the thought that they must die. In other words, hope makes love possible. With Christian hope we do not have to live this life with anxiety to get as much out of it as possible for ourselves while we

can because it is all we are going to have. With Christian hope we do not have to hold back from loving too much for fear of losing those we love. For life to be meaningful in spite of death, we do not have to evade death as much as possible, avoiding the dying and the dead, putting them out of mind. With Christian hope we can let death have its say in the world, knowing that it has only the penultimate word, not the last word. And with Christian hope we can live for others, work for God's kingdom, give ourselves in love, knowing that, as Paul puts it, our labour is not in vain and cannot be lost. Everything here and now that is worthy of eternity, God will take into eternity. There is no better reason for involvement in the needs of the present than the Christian hope of eternity. This is what Paul prays at the end of our reading from 2 Thessalonians: "May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who has shown us such love, and in his grace has given us such unfailing encouragement and so sure a hope, still encourage and strengthen you in every good deed and word."