

LENT 5 2019 (7.4.2007)

Isaiah 43 16-21, Phil. 3 4b-14, John 12 1-8

Lent is a time for renewal as Christians, for renewal in the three “theological virtues” of faith, hope and love. While most of the disciplines of Lent focus on faith and love, I want this morning to concentrate on the second of the virtues: hope.

As I may have said to some of you before, when I was young the summers were long, sunny and hot; in winter, the snow arrived just in time for Christmas and lay deep and crisp and even until it melted almost overnight and virtually without slush sometime in March!

Whether my memory is playing tricks on me or not, I would certainly not be unique in looking back to a golden age somewhere in the past and moaning about the way in which things have declined ever since. In particular, complaints about the younger generation seem to be as old as the human race itself. Even Socrates, several centuries before Jesus, moaned about the morals of the young!

This apparently universal tendency to think that everything is going to the dogs is a bit odd if you think about it. History is littered with horrors: slavery, genocides, children chimney sweeps, persecution, forced conversions, people being transported or even executed for petty theft and so on. Perhaps it is, as the great African bishop Augustine wrote in the early fifth century: *“Do you know why your parents’ times were better than your own? Of course it’s because they were their times and not your own!”*

In the Bible there are many warnings against the tendency always to be looking back. In the OT we are told quite directly, *“Do not say, Why were earlier times better than today? It is not out of wisdom that you ask this.”* (Eccl 7.10)

The reason for this is that the whole pattern of our faith, and of the Scriptures which express it, is that so far from the golden age lying in the past, the best is in fact still to come!

This is the basis for our Christian hope, but we must not misunderstand it. The way of

this world is the way of this world and in it, as Jesus warned us, we will have trouble. There is no law of progress by which things naturally get better. When Jesus gave that warning, he went on to say, "but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world." In other words, the better future God promises is not one of material improvement, but one in which we can share Christ's victory over this world with all its ups and downs.

An official of the Home Office inadvertently illustrated this truth recently when rejecting an asylum application from an Iranian refugee who had converted to Christianity and feared persecution if returned home. The interviewer asked the applicant what being a Christian meant to her. She said, "I know that Jesus Christ is my saviour." In that case, said the official, your faith cannot be genuine, because you clearly do not believe that Jesus will save you from persecution in Iran!

St Paul knew a lot about the troubles the disciples of Jesus must suffer. In this morning's second reading St Paul wrote about his own spiritual struggle: *"Forgetting what lies behind,"* he wrote, *"and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ."*

It is so easy, he knew, to be weighed down by the memory of the past, by feelings of guilt or failure, and even by the apparently intractable character of our own human nature and temperament - if only I were different, better, cleverer, healthier, younger, older, nicer, friendlier, more tolerant, stronger willed or stronger minded, clearer headed, more consistent, and so on; you can make up your own list, but all of it is dominated by those two little words "if only" - two very little words which have the power to enslave. To that imprisoning "if only" Jesus offers a promise of new life based not on our dreams about ourselves or facile optimism about this world, but simply on God's own grace and favour towards us.

You see, the best is yet to come. We can't make it for ourselves, indeed we cannot even imagine it, but we can trust God to give it and so we press forward with St Paul.