

Homily

Homily 6th Sunday of Easter 17/5/2020 - Fr Dispin John, St John's Mitcham.

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Hello.

The scene is the courtyard of a prison. The time is dawn and a prisoner is led out to be shot. He is a priest who has been sentenced to death because he has opposed the Portuguese policy of slave trade in the country's colony.

The priest stands against an outer wall, facing seven members of the firing squad, all of them his own countrymen. But before one officer ties the blindfold, he asked the priest, to be shot dead, for the traditional last request. The reply from the priest comes as a surprise to the officer. The man about to die wants to play his flute for the last time. He wanted to play his flute. The firing squad is stood at ease as they wait for the prisoner to play. When he does, the prison compound is filled with music that sounds all the more beautiful in this strained circumstance and place. The officer in charge is worried because the more the music plays, the more absurd the task of killing this man appears to be. He then orders the priest to stop playing the music, ties the blindfold and gives the soldiers the command to fire. The priest dies instantly, but the music lingers on to puzzle his executioners. In the face of the certainty of dying, where does the music come from? In the Easter season, we rejoice that the most hopeless situation, the death of God, is the way to eternal life. This hope in hopelessness is the reason the cross is the symbol of our faith.

In today's second reading, the early Christian community is told by Peter that their conduct should be such that their persecutors will be put to shame. The Spirit says, always have your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope that you all have.

What does hope look like? Where can we find it? I believe the place to look for is hopelessness. When people face persecution, hope is often the first casualty. That is why hope in the face of suffering and death is deeply puzzling to so many people, particularly to those who try to kill not only the person, but the belief of faith in that person.

Hope, I believe, is the virtue that enables us to look to the future with real confidence. It is not to be reduced to wishful thinking. We can all pass time daydreaming, imagining a future that has nothing to do with reality, like winning lotto. You can imagine that you can win that, but you cannot base your household budget for next year on that wishful thinking. Hope is grounded in life. As the Jewish writer, Martin Buber, observed, hope imagines the real and that is the difference between wishful thinking and real hope.

It is not hard to find hopelessness in our lives. There are wars and violence against the weak and the vulnerable. We suffer from diseases. There is poverty and debt. There is also hopelessness in my personal life and the lives of those who are around me. Friendships fail, dreams of a great future disappear. Love is lost and betrayed and issues with illnesses and eventual death are forever really in our lives. Even my good desires and hopes are dashed for I do not do the good that I wish but end up doing the evil that I do not want to. In the midst of all of this, to talk and behave and believe as though there is a reason to hope, thus does raise questions about my sanity to the others. Sometimes even in myself, my hope can sometimes become a point of ridicule for those who might think that I'm deluded, and that is why Jesus warns the disciples, that the world will not understand and know the Spirit since it neither sees nor knows Him. Nevertheless, that spirit of God will be in the disciples, in you and me, even though so many people cannot recognize its presence.

The hope of the disciples is something the world cannot see. For Jesus's presence is real for those who believe. Jesus makes it clear that the spirit He promises will be given not only to the present disciples, but to all who love Him and keep His commandments. If you keep my commandments, I live in you. The spirit that sustained the martyrs through their hardship and persecution and martyrdom, is the same spirit given to each one of us, you and me, that same spirit is given to us. That promise is extended to each one of us in our own struggles in faith and life. Because the risen Christ is in us, because the spirit of the risen Christ lives in us, we can face our own cross with confidence that God is still at work in us.

Since we have that hope, we can love the unlovable, forgive the unforgivable and play music in the face of suffering and death. This comes from the power of Jesus who imparts His spirit to each one of us to be our guide, courage and strength and that is why we are called to pray again and again for the renewal of that spirit within us. And with that spirit in us, we can continue the ancient Christian practice of puzzling people with hope in the face of death and suffering. And so, remember, the Lord is in you, the Lord is with you. There is no reason to despair, to not hope. Hope does not mean that we assume that all will be well one day. It does mean having confidence that even when all is not well, we are not abandoned by God, because we believe in the everlasting, the ever abiding presence of God, the gift of the Spirit that is in us. Jesus loves us, and that is our reason to hope Jesus lives in us, and that is our reason to live.