

4th Sunday (A)

29th January 2023

‘Pope Benedict’s encyclicals II: *Spe Salvi*’

Zeph 2–3: *Seek the Lord, all you, the humble of the earth ...*

1Cor 1: those whom the world thinks common and contemptible are the ones God has chosen.

Mt 5: 1–12 The Beatitudes

I promised you, 2 wks ago, following on from the death of the elderly Pope Emeritus Benedict on New Year’s Eve, that I would preach a short series of homilies prior to the start of Lent on his encyclical letters and other teaching from his 2005–13 papacy. We started, a fortnight ago, with his 1st encyclical on ‘Love’; today we continue with his 2nd encyclical on ‘Hope.’ When Archbishop Gänswein his secretary was interviewed right after his death, he said that his own personal favourite amongst Pope Benedict’s papal writings was *Spe Salvi*, this document on hope; and indeed I agree that it’s truly a beautiful document — a bit longer than the 1st encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, but not excessively so. We’ll come back to *Spe Salvi* shortly.

But, first, I want to introduce that theme with the Gospel reading, the famous passage which we’ve just heard: the text of the Beatitudes. Over these remaining first weeks of Ordinary Time before Lent we’re hearing

from that masterly body of Jesus’s teaching that Matthew places in chs. 5–7, known usually as the ‘Sermon on the Mount.’ (The ‘mount’ being the hillside above Capernaum which affords the most stunning and peaceful panorama across the Lake Galilee that Jesus knew so well — a breathtaking spot.) The opening verses of that Sermon on the Mount, vv 1–12 of ch. 5, are extraordinarily well known — words that we could almost recite from memory, perhaps — are those 8 + 1 statements, “Blessed/happy are the ...” (μακάριος can mean either), hence their being called, ‘the Beatitudes.’ They’re simple statements, and yet they express a radical Christian agenda: “*to be merciful, ... poor in spirit, ... peacemakers, ... pure of heart.*” These need a lifetime’s effort, and bear regular repeating in our liturgy, in our private prayer and in our examination of conscience. I recommend (re-)reading them, meditating on them often — one can never tire of or cease drawing profit from these important words of Jesus. But what I want to draw out from this text today, in particular, is the *hope* that each of these phrases offers the

Christian. Each of the Beatitudes looks towards a blessed future that is promised by the keeping of them: “*they shall be comforted ... they shall be satisfied ... they shall have mercy shown them ... they shall see God.*” There is a future reward that is in store, not necessarily complete in this life, but one that is held out as a guaranteed destiny for those who live this life of radical, exacting, Christian love. Hope is part and parcel of Christian faith, and this is the theme of *Spe Salvi* by Pope Benedict.

He begins his document linking hope to faith, based on the *Letter to the Hebrews*, the writings of SS Peter and Paul, and other experiences of the early Church. It wasn’t just that their new-found faith in Christ gave them some new *information* that pagan religions lacked, but that the faith leads to “trustworthy hope,” a solid hope that actually makes a meaningful difference to life here and now:

a distinguishing mark of Christians [is] the fact that they have a future: it is not that they know the details of what awaits them, but they know in general terms that their life will not end in emptiness. Only when the future is certain as a positive reality does it become possible to live the present as well. So now we can say: Christianity was not only “good news” — the communication of a hitherto unknown content.

In our language we would say: the Christian message was not only “informative” but “performative”. That means: the Gospel is not merely a communication of things that can be known — it is one that makes things happen and is life-changing. The dark door of time, of the future, has been thrown open. The one who has hope lives differently; the one who hopes has been granted the gift of a new life. (n. 2)

Pope Benedict uses the real-life examples of Onesimus, a servant of one of St Paul’s missionary collaborators, Philemon, and in the modern age of the formerly trafficked slave-girl, St Josephine Bakhita, to illustrate the new-found freedom that comes with Baptism into Christ and faith, that utterly transforms and re-orientates a life:

When the *Letter to the Hebrews* says that Christians here on earth do not have a permanent homeland, but seek one which lies in the future, this does not mean for one moment that they live only for the future: present society is recognized by Christians as an exile; they belong to a new society which is the goal of their common pilgrimage and which is anticipated in the course of that pilgrimage. (n. 4)

Pope Benedict calls this Christian virtue “faith-based hope” to distinguish it from other less-well-founded hopes. Biblical hope is an encounter with a personal God, God made man, who has become both philosopher/teacher (Christ our truth) and our shepherd (Christ our way) —

these icons of Christ occur on the sarcophagi of early Christians, proving that He was immediately their hope “in the context of death, in the face of which the question concerning life’s meaning becomes unavoidable” (n. 6).

Analysing the opening verse of a powerful chapter (ch. 11) of the *Letter to the Hebrews* allows Pope Benedict to anchor the nature of this Christian hope, used almost interchangeably with the word “faith”: “Faith is the *substance* of things hoped for; the *proof* of things not seen” (11:1). Those two words, “substance” and “proof” show that the Christian understanding of hope is as something utterly *objective*, not something merely subjective. “It gives us, even now, something of the reality we are waiting for, and this present reality constitutes for us a ‘proof’ of the things that are still unseen.” In other words, Christian hope is not some airy-fairy, pie-in-the-sky type of hope, a wishful dreaming. We often use ‘hope’ to mean that — “I hope it’s sunny later” ... “I hope my washing will dry on time” and other such ‘hopes’ that are pretty insignificant on the scale of things. But Christian hope is quite other: it

isn’t some vague, wishful thinking; “Christian faith [is] ... a life-changing and life-sustaining hope,” in that it shapes our life in an altogether new way.

The central focus of our hope is “Eternal Life,” which Pope Benedict considers at some length. Eternal Life isn’t some dull elongation of earth-like time, creating the horror of endless monotony without escape. “Without the assistance of grace,” admittedly, “immortality is more of a burden than a blessing,” as St Ambrose had said. But we do long for an end to the wretchedness of this life, whilst also having an innate sense that we want ‘life’ in its fullness, in its ideal form, to be ours for ever. In some ways, then, Eternal Life is a ‘known unknown’ — a thing we know we desire deep down, and yet which we have limited knowledge of: “imagine ourselves outside the temporality that imprisons us and ... sense that eternity is not an unending succession of days in the calendar, but something more like the supreme moment of satisfaction ... like plunging into the ocean of infinite love, a moment in which time ... no longer exists” (n. 12).

Life in its utter fullness, this is what in fact we Christians hope for. Pope Benedict at some length dispels various critiques levelled at our Christian hope. Firstly, that it is only an *individualistic* desire — that ‘I’ be saved above all things — whereas in fact our hope is always lived as something social, as the Church together in communion, a joint pilgrimage towards our salvation in the City of God. He also spends a good while critiquing the various false hopes that arose out of a post-Enlightenment move away from ‘faith-based hope’ towards a ‘faith in human/technical progress,’ whether by ultimate reliance on science and technology, or on hopes of some political ‘kingdom of man’ built along Marxist lines. He comes back then to describe lovingly “the true shape of Christian hope,” built on the fact that “It is not science which redeems man: man is redeemed by love. ... The human being needs unconditional love.” And this absolute love can only be provided by Almighty God, and hence only He can be the source of real, lasting, life-sustaining, communal hope. In a passage of exquisite beauty, Pope

Benedict sums up the essence of his encyclical:

31. Let us say once again: we need the greater and lesser hopes that keep us going day by day. But these are not enough without the great hope, which must surpass everything else. This great hope can only be God, who encompasses the whole of reality and who can bestow upon us what we, by ourselves, cannot attain. The fact that it comes to us as a gift is actually part of hope. God is the foundation of hope: not any god, but the God who has a human face and who has loved us to the end, each one of us and humanity in its entirety. His Kingdom is not an imaginary hereafter, situated in a future that will never arrive; his Kingdom is present wherever he is loved and wherever his love reaches us. His love alone gives us the possibility of soberly persevering day by day, without ceasing to be spurred on by hope, in a world which by its very nature is imperfect. His love is at the same time our guarantee of the existence of what we only vaguely sense and which nevertheless, in our deepest self, we await: a life that is “truly” life.

In a final, extended section, Pope Benedict provides three ‘settings’ in which we can learn and practise this virtue of Christian hope which he has been extolling: Prayer, Suffering, and ultimately Judgment.

(i) **Praying to God** allows Him to stretch and expand our heart’s desire, and so recover hope. As he says, in a moment of great candour, “When no-one listens to me any more, God still listens to me. When I can no longer talk to anyone or call upon anyone, I can

always talk to God. When there is no longer anyone to help me deal with a need or expectation that goes beyond the human capacity for hope, He can help me.” (n. 32)

- (ii) **Action and suffering** is the 2nd ‘school for hope.’ Pope Benedict says: “All serious and upright human conduct is hope in action ... Only the great certitude of hope that my own life and history in general, despite all failures, are held firm by the indestructible power of Love, and that this gives them their meaning and importance, only this kind of hope can then give the courage to act and persevere.” (n. 35) But he adds that suffering will be a part of human existence too, and holding firm to hope through suffering — much as we try to limit the effects of evil — is salutary and helps mature our hopes: “It is hope — not yet fulfilment; hope that gives us the courage to place ourselves on the side of good even in seemingly hopeless situations.” (n. 36)
- (iii) And, finally, **Judgment**. Maybe we don’t look forward to our personal judgment, purgatory, and the final judgement; but in fact it is this spiritual arena that we can place our ultimate hope. In passages of real insight, Pope Benedict describes at length the nature of purgatory, and the hope of eternal life that springs out of our knowing that we will be judged by perfect Love and in perfect Justice. “The fire which

both burns and saves is Christ Himself, the Judge and Saviour. The encounter with Him is the decisive act of judgment. Before His gaze all falsehood melts away. The encounter with Him, as it burns us, transforms and frees us, allowing us to become truly ourselves. ... His gaze, the touch of His heart heals us through an undeniably painful transformation ‘as through fire.’ But it is a blessed pain, in which the holy power of His love sears through us like a flame, enabling us to become totally ourselves, and thus totally of God. In this way the inter-relation between justice and grace also becomes clear: the way we live our lives is not immaterial, but defilement does not stain us for ever if we have at least continued to reach out towards Christ, towards truth and towards love.” (n. 46)

In Jesus, in His mercy, and in His loving Judgment of us to make us fit for Eternal Life, we can and do place our great Hope. “*Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven.*”