

4th SUNDAY of LENT 2020

In all troubled and uncertain times, the one thing we need is hope. Life cannot be fully lived without hope. Hope is an expression of divine love touching the human heart – and so we know that hope is never in vain. A contemporary ecologist has said:

“If you only carry one thing throughout your entire life, let it be hope. Let it be hope that better things are always ahead. Let it be hope that can get you through even the toughest of times. Let it be hope that you are stronger than any challenge that comes your way. Let it be hope that you are exactly where you are meant to be right now, and that you are on the path to where you are meant to be... Because during these times, hope is the very thing that carries you through.”

“They say a person needs just three things to be truly happy in this world: someone to love, something to do, and something to hope for.”

Life is nothing without hope. In the *Inferno* of his *Divine Comedy*, Dante said that above the gates of Hell were written the words: ‘Abandon Hope All You Who Enter Here.’ Which, for us, is an impossible prospect to accept. Hope is from God – panic and fear – which is presently dominating many people’s lives – is not. The word ‘panic’ comes from the name of the ancient Greek god Pan – half man, half goat – who was the god of nature, wild and uncontrollable and unpredictable. This is how we are currently experiencing nature: uncontrollable.

Everyone should be cautious in such times, but not paranoid. The media fuels the fires of paranoia because, for one thing, it sells newspapers. Good – or at least positive – news has never had a high market value. And yet in the midst of this present crisis, strangely positive things are happening: the canals in Venice suddenly have fish in them; greenhouse gases have dropped by 50% and toxic emissions from cars and planes also dropped dramatically; America and Iran have forgotten to scream at each other and a new spirit of a common humanity has begun to displace the selfishness and self-concern of mob mentality in supermarkets. China recently sent a large consignment of masks to Italy with the message: ‘We live in different countries far away from each other, but we walk under the same moon.’

This corona virus is a terrible thing and the heart bleeds for all those who have lost loved ones; and yet within the shadows of disaster, flames of hope in the best of human nature have sprung up.

The virus is not conscious; it does not have a personality; it does not think or feel; it has no will and therefore does not destroy intentionally. Yet somehow our attention is being drawn to all the damage and harm that *our* thinking and feeling and will have inflicted on the world and each other.

My favourite quotation about hope comes from the third volume – *The Return of the King* – of J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*. Frodo and Sam are wandering

through Mordor, at the end of their strength, seemingly utterly defeated. Then Sam sees something:

“There, peeping among the cloud-wrack above a dark tor high up in the mountains, Sam saw a white star twinkle for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart, and as he looked up out of the forsaken land, hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach.”

It isn't rocket science to realize that the world is not the way it ought to be – and never has been. It may seem that we are at present in a forsaken land. However, sometimes help comes only when, like Sam, we look up: above self-concern, above hard-heartedness, above the daily troubles of our own private life, above our personal worries, anxieties and fears. If we manage, even just for a while, to rise above all these things and look around us at the suffering of others, we will understand that in the end, all suffering is shared. We are waves of the same ocean.