

SESSION 4 / HOPE AGAINST HOPE

In hope, he believed against hope (Romans 4:18).

Theme The virtue of hope enables us to desire things that are naturally impossible to us, such as holiness, eternal life and beatitude in God. We hope because God makes these things possible for us to obtain.

Welcome: We Pray and Share Together (15 mins)

O God,
send forth your Holy Spirit
into our hearts that we might perceive,
into our minds that we might remember,
into our souls that we might meditate.
Inspire us to speak with love, holiness,
tenderness and mercy.
Teach, guide and direct our thoughts and senses
from beginning to end.
May your grace help us to see with your eyes
and to act with your love and light in our hearts.
May we be strengthened with wisdom from on high
for the sake and glory of your kingdom.
Through Jesus Christ, our Lord.
Amen.

In a period of calm and a space of trust, each one of us is invited to share briefly one thing that has happened in the past week. It could be one thing that has given you cause for concern, something shared during the last time you met as a group or something that has given you cause to celebrate.

In this moment of peace and fellowship, we pray for the good of the group. Each member is invited to offer up any personal intentions. We also pray for the good of the Church, for wisdom in our country and for the common good. Let us also bring to mind the poor, the sick and those who have died.

We join together in praying: Our Father...

Read and Reflect on the Scriptures Luke 23:32-43 (5 mins)

Note: Luke is the only evangelist to mention the interaction of the two criminals with Jesus during the crucifixion. This passage recounts the extraordinary prayer of hope of the 'good thief', who becomes, as a result, the first saint to enter heaven.

A variety of short prayers before the reading of Scripture can be found on page 46.

Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And they cast lots to divide his garments. And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise."

Meditate on the Word Luke 15:11-24 (20 mins)

Once the Scripture passage has been read you are asked to choose a word or phrase that has struck you. Underline it with a pen or you might wish to simply hold it in mind. You will be invited to share the word or phrase with the group.

Another person will then read the passage. While you listen attentively, repeat the process of holding onto a word or phrase, making a note and sharing it. In doing this, you are invited to consider the following questions:

How have these words or phrases resonated in my heart and in my mind?

What is the Lord saying to me at this very moment in my life?

In what way has my reading of this passage of Holy Scripture changed me?

How has it helped me to resolve to be more Christ-like in the coming days?

You are encouraged to re-read the Holy Scripture during the coming week, revisiting these questions.

Explore and Reflect on the Theme (25 mins)

At Calvary, as he is facing inevitable death in the most terrible pains, a criminal is able to recognise in the disfigured one crucified by his side the Lord who alone is able to welcome him into his eternal Kingdom. In the final moments of his sinful life, when nothing can possibly be hoped for in human terms, the 'good thief' turns to the only One who offers humanity 'hope against hope': a divine hope, infinite in scope, when all human hope ends.

Human hope is always framed by the limits of realistic possibilities. As humans, we can only hope for what lies within our limited expectation: a new job, a good bargain, a great relationship, a positive result... We cannot hope, on our strength alone, for what is beyond our natural possibility to achieve or obtain, such as physically growing wings, being loved perfectly by another human person, the total avoidance of sin, or a life that does not end in death.

Through His Sacrifice, Jesus Christ opens for humanity a new hope. The good thief is one of the first witnesses of this new hope, showing us that holiness is possible for everyone, even the worst sinner, and that physical death can be the entry into the eternal beatitude of God's Kingdom. The possibilities of our new hope in Christ are infinite, since they correspond to the infinity of his love for us. God in Christ saves us from the inner slavery of sin, from our inability to love perfectly, from the inevitability of eternal death. He alone transforms the human heart through grace and makes saints out of sinners. Like the good thief, we are invited simply to place all our trust in Him. Those who have placed their hope in God do not fear human failure, sin, and death, since on the Cross they are revealed to be overcome by an infinitely greater love: the all-powerful mercy of God.

We first receive God's gift of salvation in Christ at Baptism. Having died to sin and risen to new life in Him, our baptismal grace keeps us united to Him, strong in the virtues of faith, hope and charity. Should we fall away from Christ, the sacrament of reconciliation is freely offered to us through the Church as the way to return to Him and be restored in grace and holiness. In this sacrament, we experience the infinity of God's mercy in the forgiveness of all our sins, regardless of their gravity or quantity.

Following the example of the good thief, we need the humility to recognise in the sacrament of confession the presence of the Lord who alone can open his Kingdom to us, and the hope to approach Him there. Despair or presumption can sometimes prevent us from taking hold of the salvation God offers us in the sacrament of his forgiveness: we can despair that our sins are too great for Him to forgive, or we can presume that receiving His forgiveness sacramentally, in the way that He offers it to us, is unnecessary. Yet Jesus constantly offers those who turn to Him in the sacrament of confession the new hope of holiness and eternal happiness in Him.

Responding to what has been heard

By committing ourselves to action we are saying that we want to make a difference in our lives and in the lives of others. We are committing to make hope resonate in our lives. What have you heard today that you find challenging? What do you find affirming? What are you going to do about what you have heard today?

Go in Peace to Love and Serve the Lord (10 mins)

You are invited to close with a time of meditation on Psalm 130 (129). Read it slowly, pause between verses, reflect on its meaning for your life and your journey in faith, hope and love. You may also wish to conclude with the Lord's Prayer, another prayer of your own choosing or a moment of silence.

A: Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord;
Lord, hear my voice!
O let your ears be attentive
to the sound of my pleadings.

B: If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities,
Lord, who could stand?
But with you is found forgiveness,
that you may be revered.

A: I long for you, O Lord,
my soul longs for his word.
My soul awaits the Lord
more than watchmen for daybreak.
More than watchmen for daybreak,
let Israel hope for the Lord.

B: For with the Lord there is mercy,
in him is plentiful redemption.
It is he who will redeem Israel
from all its iniquities.

All: Glory be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

A blessing taken from the Liturgy of the Hours is included here.

May the Lord bless us and keep us from all evil
and bring us to everlasting life. Amen.

Christ offers us infinite hope

The Christian meaning of death is revealed in the light of the Paschal mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ in whom resides our only hope. The Christian who dies in Christ Jesus is "away from the body and at home with the Lord."
CCC 1681

There is no offense, however serious, that the Church cannot forgive. "There is no one, however wicked and guilty, who may not confidently hope for forgiveness, provided his repentance is honest. Christ who died for all men desires that in his Church the gates of forgiveness should always be open to anyone who turns away from sin.
CCC 982

No man in this world is strong, except in the hope of God's promises: for as to our own deservings, we are weak, in His mercy we are strong.

St Augustine

I'm not relying on my own merits, as I have none, but I put my hope in Him who is goodness and holiness Himself.

St Therese of Lisieux

I am certain that even if I had on my conscience every imaginable crime, I should lose nothing of my confidence; rather I would hurry, with a heart broken with sorrow, to throw myself into the Arms of my Jesus.

St Therese of Lisieux

Hope does not trust chiefly in grace already received, but on God's omnipotence and mercy, whereby even he that has not grace, can obtain it, so as to come to eternal life.

St Thomas Aquinas



Meditate on Sacred Art: Visio Divina (4)

Spend some time identifying the people surrounding Jesus on the Cross and their different attitudes and actions.

What are the visual differences portrayed between the two criminals crucified on each side of the Lord? What do they express?

How did the artist choose to depict the background of the scene? How does it communicate hope?

How can the artwork help us to understand the sacrament of reconciliation and encourage us to approach it in hope?

The Crucifixion (1711) by Ioannis Moskos