

“Ask and you will receive and your joy will be complete.”

This past Tuesday, as I was on my way home from visiting a parishioner, I got into a conversation with a man about the Christian faith. I was purchasing a bottle of water from him. He was a very friendly and welcoming man. One could even say that he was filled with joy. But it wasn't long into our conversation before he revealed the source of his joy. He told me that he grew up in the Christian faith but that he had graduated. He was happy to have his Christian upbringing in the past. Because now he has realized that God is not how he is described in the Bible. God, he says, is a loving God, and he would therefore never send anyone to hell. He was very sure of himself. Of course, I challenged his assertion. I told him that if he could fully understand God's goodness, then God wouldn't be God. But you can barely scratch the surface of how deep God's love is. You therefore can only scratch the surface of how righteous God's judgment is. Finally, near the end of our conversation, he said that he didn't believe in hell. So I said, "Then you must not believe in heaven." He responded, "No, I don't believe in heaven either." So I answered, "Then you have no hope! What do you look forward to?" He went on to describe some kind of static existence of energy. I responded, "That's not hope at all. It's completely hopeless." He gave me a look, this time not as confident and joyful as he had been before. By that time, there was a man behind me waiting to buy something. So the conversation ended.

The Christian faith is a religion of hope. We always have something to look forward to, to press on toward, something that keeps us going. And this is no theory of material energy or dream of nirvana. No, this hope is grounded in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ. He has returned to his Father, obedient to every one of his commandments, passing through the trials as he bore our sin, his own wrath, and the tortures of the cross. In this way he has prepared for us a place with his Father in his Father's house. The love he has shared with the Father, the love which, as St. Paul says, surpasses knowledge, he now shares with us. So as we are bound together in this love by which he gave his life for us, we look forward to what he has prepared for us and secured for us in heaven. This is our hope.

Hope is something you look forward to. Hope is the confidence that there will be a happy and joyful ending. It isn't an incomplete, disappointing, doubtful ignorance of what might happen. No, it is a joyful confidence that all things will come together. Not even a jot of God's Word will fall to the ground. All the heavens and the earth will declare that God has worked everything out for you who love him and have been called according to his good plan and purpose in Jesus Christ. This is hope. Hope looks forward to completion, to a consummation, where all things will be complete and in order and perfectly knit together in harmony. Our bodies will rise from the dust to be reunited with our souls. The entire church, all who are called to faith in Jesus, will be revealed to be Jesus' perfect and spotless body, forever united and subjected to the Father who put all things in subjection under him. This is our hope. So in hope we wait patiently. We hope with a still and quiet peace, confident that the Lord is God, and he will be exalted. In fact, we can have this hope, because he already has been exalted.

Jesus says, "Ask and you will receive and your joy will be complete." Here Jesus is teaching us what prayer is. Prayer is the exercise of hope. And prayer is hopeful, because it looks forward to what has already been prepared for us in Christ. It rests on the words and works of Jesus, which he has accomplished for us. It therefore expects a joyful outcome. Call upon me, God says, in the day of trouble, and I will deliver you, and you will glorify me (Ps. 50:15). Your light afflictions, which are only for a moment, St. Paul says, are preparing you for the glory to be revealed. This is what Jesus is talking

about when he says that your joy will be complete. It is the joy of seeing your Savior face to face. It is the joy of salvation, which the Holy Spirit restores to you and by which he upholds you to the very end.

That poor man I ran into on Tuesday didn't have this kind of joy. He was happy, warm, and welcoming. I liked him. Who wouldn't like him? But if I was to love him, as my Savior commands me to do, then I needed to acknowledge that his joy was only a worldly joy. His joy cannot be completed, because it rests only on his own reason and intelligence. His joy is completely void of hope.

No matter how much unbelievers talk and explain their theories of what has happened in the past and what will happen in the future, they can have no confidence. They can have no living hope. They will not be heard for their many words.

And we will not be heard because of our many words. We don't have hope for the future – we can't anticipate a full and complete joy – because we have figured it out on our own. No, we rest on the words and works of Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God. This is why Jesus tells us to pray in his name. To pray in Jesus' name is nothing other than to trust in his promise. Rest on his words. This is what makes prayer what it is. Prayer is talking to God while listening to and resting in what he says about his Son. It is a sure and living hope, which cannot put you to shame, because the love of God has been poured into your heart by his Holy Spirit.

You love Jesus. You love him, because he first loved you. He gave you his name and his image. He gave you everything he did and everything he is. He covers your sins with his righteousness, he overcomes your death with his death, and he establishes your hope of a completed joy in his resurrection. He has completed God's will for you. He has fulfilled the law for you, obeying all God's commandments in your place. He has satisfied God's wrath and accomplished your salvation. He bore his cross with patience, not letting the shame affect his spirit, and this was precisely because of the joy he was looking forward to. This is the joy of winning you for himself and raising you up on the last day. So Jesus says in John chapter 15, during this same conversation with his disciples,

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Stay in my love. If you obey my commandments, you will stay in my love, as I have obeyed my Father's commandments and stay in his love. I told you this so that my joy will be in you and your joy will be complete. (John 15:9-11)

Here is the greatest commandment of your Savior. It is to ask the Father anything. Here we see that this commandment is nothing short of an invitation and a promise. The Father loves you, because you love Jesus and believe that he has come forth from the Father. Jesus is not teaching you that your love merits the love of God. Instead, he is simply teaching you that the love and joy you have from Jesus and share with Jesus is the same love and joy he has always had with his Father. You can know that the Father himself loves you, because you are in Christ and Christ is in you. You are his and he is yours. The Father loves his Son more than this world could ever know. He rejoices over everything his Son does. So if the Son sets you free, then you are truly free. If the Son loves you, and you share his love with one another, then you can know that the Father loves you and wants to hear you call out to him. As we sing in the hymn, "If the Son so loveth me, God must have compassion."

The Son returned to his Father. In fact, the Father has always been with the Son. Even when he was abandoned and forsaken to the cross, crying out, "My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me!" the

Father remained with the Son. The Father answered his cry. He heard his prayer. He did not take his hope away from him. Instead, he completed his joy by raising him from the dead and seating him at his right hand. And there, at the right hand of the Father, is your hope and joy completed. There is Jesus pleading for you, interceding for you as your Mediator and Savior forever.

This is why Jesus says, "Then you will ask in my name, and I don't tell you that I will ask the Father for you." He isn't saying that he won't be our Mediator and our Advocate before the Father. Instead, he is teaching that his work of pleading for us and interceding for us is full and sure. He doesn't need to pray for us again and again like the priests of the Old Testament had to offer sacrifices and prayers every evening and morning. But as Jesus said on the cross right before his death, "It is finished!" This means that Jesus is not sitting up in heaven bartering with God, as if God isn't convinced yet. No, he has made full satisfaction for our sins, and now he stands as our Advocate before the Father, having perfected our righteousness and redemption, having prepared a place for us in heaven, having established our inheritance, and thereby giving us a living hope.

This means that we can be confident that the Father hears us for Christ's sake. Our hope is not in vain. We don't need to come up with some theory of what will happen. When we pray to God, we don't need to make a deal with him. His Word has already been fulfilled. So any vows we do make to God, like that we will forgive those who sin against us, continue to repent of our sins, learn his Word, love one another, and speak his truth, we are making these vows because we have confidence in what Christ has already accomplished. Everything we do, whether in word or in deed, we do in the name of Jesus Christ, giving thanks to God the Father through him. His name has been given to us. So when we live in his name, depending on what he has fulfilled for us, applying his commandments and instructions to our life, we find joy in it. And this is no fleeting joy, which is here today and gone tomorrow. This is not a joy concocted from our own theories and intelligent thoughts. No, it is a joy completed in the death and resurrection of our Savior. So we look forward, with a living hope, to the joy that is set before us. He who calls us to pray to him is faithful, and he will fulfill our joy. Let us pray:

When we perfect joy shall enter,
Tis in Him our bliss will rise.
He's the essence, soul, and center
Of the glory in the skies.
In redemption's wondrous story
Planned before our parents' fall,
From the cross unto the glory,
Jesus Christ is all in all.

Therefore, Father, hear our crying
For the sake of Jesus' love!
Let our living and our dying
Rest upon His name above!
Since Thou gave Thy Sole Begotten
Into death to bear our sin,
Pray'rs of faith are not forgotten.
Grant us peace and joy within! Amen.