

6th SUNDAY OF EASTER

Year A

The scene is the courtyard of a prison. The time is dawn. 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. He stands against an outer wall facing seven members of the firing squad, all of them his own countrymen. Before the officer ties the blindfold he asks the prisoner for the traditional last request. The reply comes as a surprise: the man about to die wants to play his flute for the last time.

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 strange place. The officer is worried because the more the music plays, the more absurd his task appears to be. He orders the prisoner to stop playing, ties the blindfold, and gives his soldiers the command to fire. The priest dies instantly. But the sound of the music lingers on to haunt and puzzle his executioners; in the face of certain death, where does the music come from ?

In today's second reading the early Christian community is told that their conduct should be such that their persecutors will be put to shame: "Always have your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope that you all have. But give it with courtesy and respect and with a clear conscience, so that those who slander you when you are living a good life in Christ may be proved wrong in the accusations that they bring."

When people face persecution, hope is often the first casualty. That is why hope in the face of violent death is deeply puzzling to many people – particularly to those who aspire to kill not only the believers but what they believe in. What kind of hope is it that enables those who suffer to play music in the face of death ? In the death of the martyr, the persecutor and the onlooker are always questioned by the hope that sees through death.

Hope 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 the time daydreaming, imagining a future that has nothing to do with reality. Wishful thinking has no bounds; it admits of no limitation; it is not criticised by what is actually possible. I can ask you to imagine a tartan elephant with six legs doing a highland fling. You can imagine that, but it would be foolish to hope that you will see it happen one day. Hope is grounded in life. As the Jewish writer Martin Buber observed : “ *hope*

imagines the real.” That is the difference between hope and wishful thinking.

Hope is not limitless; it is limited by real possibility. Hope needs help if it is going to go beyond the expression of desire. You can hope for peace, but you need a lot of practical help if it is to come about. Without help, hope remains an orphan – abandoned in the nursery of the mind and the imagination.

Jesus has no intention of leaving his disciples behind him in a situation where they are left to hope without any help. Jesus promises his followers the Spirit, the Advocate, who will be with them forever. *The power of the Spirit is the help of Christian hope.* Without the Spirit, the followers of Jesus would be thrown back on their own resources, which is clearly inadequate when the going gets rough. The time of Jesus’ passion proved that. With the help of the Spirit, however, the disciples can face the future with a power that is much larger than themselves

The hope of the disciples is something the world *can* see, but cannot account for. The disciples can account for their hope by pointing to the power of God’s Spirit which funds them. They know that that power is not their own. Without that Spirit, there would be no music to puzzle the firing squad.

Finally Jesus makes it clear that the Spirit he promises will be given not only to the present disciples but to all those who love him and keep his commandments. The Spirit which will sustain them through persecution and martyrdom is the same Spirit which is given to all who love Jesus. That promise is extended to each of us in our own struggle in faith. And that is why we are called by the Church to pray again for a renewal in the Spirit at Pentecost. With that Spirit in us we can continue the ancient Christian practice of puzzling people with the hope that is in us.