

3. The anchor of salvation

Hope is symbolized by the anchor, for example in chapter 6 of the letter to the Hebrews:

“For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, saying, “Surely I will bless you and multiply you.” And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise. [...] So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.” (Heb 6:13–20)

The promise of life and fruitfulness that God makes to us proposes a hope: “We who have fled for refuge have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us.” This holding fast to the hope that God’s promise proposes to us is like tossing the anchor of life that it stay fixed, be attached, to “the inner place behind the curtain,” where Christ has gone before us by ascending into heaven to take his seat at the right hand of the Father, and where he intercedes for us by offering himself as Priest and Victim for our redemption.

These images from the letter to the Hebrews describe our life like a ship that finds tranquility and safety only if its anchor gets thrown and hooked beyond the veil of the sanctuary, beyond the immediate reality, to be fixed in Heaven, in the eternity in which Christ entered after his death and resurrection by ascending into Heaven. Basically, the anchor of hope is Christ himself, his crucified humanity, which bears our wounds in the presence of the Father. An anchor, in fact, has the form of the Cross, and for this reason it also gets represented in the catacombs to symbolize that the faithful deceased belong to Christ the Savior. This anchor is already firmly attached to the port of our salvation. Our task, that which we are asked to have in ourselves as hope, is represented rather by the line that links our ship to the anchor of Christ. In Him, that is to the anchor, the line is well tied, but it’s like we are asked to tie the boat to this line, to tie our life to it, to be attached to Christ who saves us, who has already saved us by dying and rising for us. We navigate on the troubled waves of the sea and we need to be anchored to something solid. But by now the task is no longer that of casting the anchor and hooking it to the sea bottom. The task is to attach our ship to the line that, so to speak, hangs down from Heaven, there where the anchor of Christ is firmly fixed. By attaching ourselves to this line, we attach ourselves to the anchor of salvation and make our hope certain.

What does it mean to have a certain hope? There is a well-known prayer of St. Francis that I’ve been praying every day for almost fifty years, a prayer that he prayed before the Crucifix of San Damiano, the one that spoken to him and from which his whole vocation came:

“O high and glorious God, lighten the darkness of my heart.
Give me unwavering faith, sure hope, and perfect love, deep humility.
Give me, Lord, wisdom and discernment, that I may fulfill your true and holy will.”

The image of the letter to the Hebrews makes us understand that hope is certain when the boat of our life, tossed about by the waves, is attached to the line that binds us to the anchor that, beyond the veil of the sanctuary, is fixed on Christ crucified who is at the right hand of the Father, that is, in the eternal communion and preference of the Father, in the love of the Holy Spirit.

This image makes us understand that there is no certainty in the hope with which we walk in life if there is not this link with eternity. But not a vague, faceless eternity: the trinitarian eternity, the eternal love of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit, to which Christ crucified and risen has, with his human body wounded and glorious, anchored our wounded humanity, called to make landfall, to reach the glory of Heaven with Him.

This is all well put in the liturgical collect of the solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord: “Gladden us with holy joys, almighty God, and make us rejoice with devout thanksgiving, for the Ascension of Christ your Son is our exaltation, and, where the Head has gone before in glory, the Body is called to follow in hope.”

The glorious Christ incarnates and makes eternal the hope for this fulfillment.