

Sunday 2B

Advent is a time of hope, and certainly it comes just in time for us as Catholics. Or so it appears to me. A year or two ago someone sent me a poem by Emily Dickinson which speaks of hope as a “thing with feathers that perches in the soul and sings a tune without words and never stops at all.” So we are to think of hope as a tiny bird singing in our souls, as a thing with feathers.

As many of you know, St. Ignatius has rules for the discernment of spirits. The phrase, discernment of spirits, sounds formidable, but it is actually describing something which all humans do just because they are humans. We all have experiences and these experiences leave an after-taste in our minds and hearts, and we often go back over them and ask why the after-taste is as it is. Why is it sometimes a good after-taste, and why it is at other times a bad after-taste?

Ignatius’ first experiences of such after-tastes came while he was recuperating from an operation on his broken leg. It had healed, but one bone was left protruding over the other at the knee. And so he had the surgeons saw the protrusion off and stretch his leg. He wanted to walk straight and look good. So his original

rehabilitation period was extended and Ignatius had more time to daydream. Sometimes he would dream of doing great things for a woman of higher rank whom he loved, though from a distance, for there was no chance of his courting her. But he had also begun to read the only books which he could find in his brother's house where he was recuperating, and they were all of a religious nature. Lives of the saints, for example, which told of their extraordinary deeds. And then Ignatius noticed something. When he reflected on his dreams about his lady-love, he did not feel happy but sad, but when he reflected on his dreams about the saints, he felt happy.

From this reflection on his daydreams he discovered what he thought was a basic rule or norm for judging what comes from God and what comes from an evil spirit. If a person is trying to lead a good life as a Christian, then the daydreams that leave us with an after-taste of hope and peace come from God, but if they leave us with a bad taste they come from an evil spirit. That is his first rule for discerning the spirits which can affect us. However, if we are not trying to lead a good life, then this first rule is reversed. Then the evil spirit will create a false hope and peace in us, while the good spirit will leave us with a bad taste. He puts it this way: "In the case of those who are going from good to better, the good angel touches the soul gently, lightly, and sweetly, like a drop of water

going into a sponge. The evil spirit touches it sharply, with noise and disturbance, like a drop of water falling onto a stone. However, in the case of those who are going from bad to worse, these spirits touch the souls in the opposite manner. And now the reason why this is so: “The reason for this is the fact that the disposition of the soul is either similar to or different from the respective spirits who are entering. When the soul is different, they enter with perceptible noise and are quickly noticed. When the soul is similar, they enter silently, like those who go into their own house by an open door.” So, to paraphrase, good spirits enter the good soul quietly, but evil ones with noise. But evil spirits enter the evil soul quietly, but good ones with noise.

The hope with feathers which entered Emily Dickinson’s soul was a good spirit entering a good soul. So no noise, just quiet, just feathers. Or so I am interpreting her soul. Discouragement, on the other hand, would have disturbed her. There would have been noise in her good soul.

I am wondering what our spirit should be this Advent. Advent is a season of hope. It is the time when the liturgy of the Church calls us to meditate on the twofold coming of the Lord to the world: his first coming as the Divine Word made flesh, and his second

coming at the end of our world as the Judge of history. Both comings are acts of love on God's part. Therefore, they should fill our souls with gratitude and love, and, of course, hope. Hope's feathers are all around us. Hope has perched in our souls.

Yet the feathers of our hope are weighed down at this time by the consequences of past sins, especially by us the clergy: priests for abusing children and bishops for failing to report these crimes and remove these priests from ministry. The consequences of these sins are terrible. Many have left the Church, and many younger people refuse to have anything to do with the Church. There are fewer and fewer men entering our seminaries. And the disrespect and even hatred of our church among non-members is now a reality in the larger culture.

Can we sustain our hope in this situation? Or will that little bird with feathers vanish from our souls? We must not let it go. We must somehow sustain it in our souls. If we do not, hatred will take its place. We will begin to answer with hate the hate that we feel around us.

We are now at a point where we have to live the reality of the Gospel message. We have to live the Lord's words when he says to

us: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust” (Mt 5: 44-45). Yes, we must reform ourselves. No more abusing priests. No more bishops blind to abusers. But while doing that, we have to meet those who have become our enemies with love and with hope, with that thing with feathers.