

Are you an optimist or a pessimist? Is your glass always half full or half empty? Pessimists are skilled in making themselves and everyone around them feel gloomy. They lack the hope or will to change things for the better, even things which may be quite easy to improve. So, things in their life may continue to get worse, and it will be largely their own fault.

Such people may often insist that they are, in fact, realists. They accept things as they are, and those things give them no cause for hope, and so they have no strong motive for changing them. Optimists, who would also call themselves realists, see things much more positively. They are blessed with hope and want to do what they can to make things better, and they believe that life can become more hopeful and joyful in spite of the difficulties and challenges.

As we look at the world around us, and maybe some of our own experiences, it is quite easy to become pessimistic or depressed. But, especially as Christians, people of faith, we must keep our sights raised towards better times which will come soon, however long 'soon' may be. We need to be confident, or we might simply make ourselves ill with worry. We need to hope and pray for something new to emerge from today's depressing realities, something that is going to make a difference to our lives and the lives of those who come after us, and especially the lives of the many for whom life has always meant hardship and suffering.

Raising our sights is an appropriate term to use at this point in the 50-day season of Easter. We have reached Ascension-tide. Last Thursday was Ascension Day, following the symbolic time frame of the evangelist Luke in his second book, the Acts of the Apostles, where he records that forty days after his Passion, the risen Jesus 'left' his disciples by ascending above the clouds to heaven. Luke uses pictorial and metaphorical imagery to stress the profound truth that the Lord is now in glory with his heavenly Father.

But the story of the Ascension also stresses that Christ has *never* left the world, never left us. Rather he has raised us up to where he is, although while we live this life, our resurrection/ascension is not yet complete. And to draw on the thinking of St Augustine, Christ still experiences on earth whatever sufferings we his members undergo. This is made clear when he, risen and exalted, appeared to Saul of Tarsus, the future St Paul, who was on his way to Damascus

to punish the Christians there, and he called to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute *me*?' This is an expression of how Christ now lives on earth through his disciples, his Church, and their experiences whether good or bad, are also his.

As Christians we understand the risen Christ to be present and active among us through the Holy Spirit. The Spirit ensures that the presence of the risen and exalted Christ is with us always, however we may feel, whatever we may be suffering. This is certainly cause for hope. Paul says that hope is one of the fruits of the Spirit. This suggests that we cannot become optimistic by our own efforts alone. We have to allow God to dwell in our hearts and inspire us. Hope may grow gradually, like fruit on a tree. But grow it certainly will if our lives are centred in God.

Of course, if we have no faith, it is difficult to have hope or to trust God to help us. But, as Jesus said and demonstrated, all things are possible with faith. In today's Gospel he prays that we may be sanctified, blessed with truth, and that God's word is truth. He said that he does not pray that God our Father would take us out of the world, thus removing us from life's problems, but that God would protect us from evil. In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul writes that he prayed to be healed of a particular affliction, but that God gave him a greater blessing. He heard God saying to him, 'My grace is sufficient for you.' It was the grace to endure his suffering courageously.

In our second reading today, John writes: 'If we receive human testimony, the testimony of God is greater.....Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their hearts (that) God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.' 'Eternal life' in the Gospel of John is essentially the equivalent term to the 'kingdom of God' in the other Gospels. It is explained very succinctly just a few verses before our passage today: 'Eternal life is this: to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.'

To *know* Jesus means so much more than simply knowing *about* him. To know Jesus is to identify with him, embrace his compassion, his values, to become his follower, his disciple, to seek to be close to him discover how a living relationship with him will shape our life, our behaviour and our world view. To know Jesus is to love him, and that includes loving what he loves: the world,

the creation, our fellow human beings without distinction or judgement. It is such love that brings us to experience eternal life, to live truly in the kingdom of God.

Eternal life, then, is not something that we have to wait for. It is a state and a relationship we choose to live in now, while we have life on this earth, and with the confidence that it will continue when our earthly journey comes to an end. This is the way to live in hope, and *hopefully* it will bring us much joy.

Whatever happens to us, whatever the world or some of its people might throw at us, it is clearly being true to our faith, true to the gospel, and in our best interests to be optimistic.