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Editorial for Theological Studies (June 2011)

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From the Editor's Desk

Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them. . . . He said to Jesus, “Lord, what about him?” Jesus said to Peter, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!” So the rumor spread in the community that this disciple would not die. Yet Jesus did not say . . . that he would not die but, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?” (Jn 21:20–22, NAB).

This issue of *Theological Studies* features three articles on hope and the church that originated at the June 2010 meeting of the Catholic Theological Society of America. The meeting’s theme was “Theology’s Prophetic Commitments,” and one expression of it was a session entitled “Hope: The Church’s Prophetic Challenge.” Two papers from this session and a comment on them were developed for publication here. Underlying the articles is the conviction that prophecy in and for the church embodies both hope and challenge; indeed, the session’s title implies that for today’s church hope is itself a prophetic challenge.

The three articles prompt my own reflection on hope and the church. For this purpose, I propose understanding the “beloved disciple” as representing disciples whose faith is quite complete, and Peter as representing disciples whose faith is yet to be completed.

Hope is the theological virtue that most closely embodies what Jesus told Peter—and us—to cultivate as we, the church, move out in space and time from our origins in Jerusalem. “The rumor spread in the community” that this beloved disciple “would not die. Yet Jesus did not say . . . that he would not die.” Indeed, Matthew tells us that Jesus commanded the eleven gathered on the mountain after his death and resurrection to “go . . . and make disciples of all the nations. . . . Teach them to carry out everything I have commanded you. And know that I am with you always, to the end of the world!” (Mt 28:19–20). So Jesus did not say that the beloved disciple would not die, but only that, whatever might happen to him—and to us, the church—along the way, he would be with us: his presence to us in his Spirit is the rock of hope on which we stand. Our rock is not the church but Jesus, who, despite having suffered heinous persecution and crucifixion, through his being raised from the dead conquers the forces of sin and death.

For Paul, the rock that gave the Israelites water in the desert (Exod 17:6) became for Christians the figure of Jesus become the Christ (1 Cor 10:4). Christian prophecy developed out of Hebrew prophecy. Beginning in the earliest monarchy as clairvoyance and ecstatic speech, that prophecy developed away from such external manifestations to delivering the word of the Lord bluntly and courageously, proclaiming to both rulers and ruled what behaviors are and are not in accord with God’s word. The prophets’ message might be simply stated as this: hope lives only from adherence to the Lord’s word. For the early church, all Hebrew prophecy was seen as fulfilled in Christ, the paradigm of obedience to God’s word (Phil 2:5–11). Christ was the steadfast “yes” to God’s promises (2 Cor 1:19–20), and as such he continues to nourish and sustain us on our way, even in our wanderings and failures. Yes, the church is by its nature called to *preach* the word, but the foundation for this calling is the preached *word*, Jesus Christ, who endowed us with his Spirit to recall what he taught us: his transformation promises ours, and thus founds the hope that the church manifests to the world.

I find it helpful regularly to remind myself of this truth, because we know from Genesis 1–11 and our own experience how prone we are pridefully to exalt the human aspect of our institutions as rivals to God (see the Babel narrative). When this happens, our vision gets distorted, and we can easily mistake merely human teachings, ordinances, and powers for divine. In that case prophecy and the prophet’s behavior are discordant; listeners can easily recognize the discrepancy and turn away. For them, all too often, the church itself has died—a tragic conclusion. But more tragic than the disillusionment caused by the church’s sinfulness is that members sometimes too closely identify church leadership with the rock on which the church is founded, Jesus Christ. And while all of us are beset by the temptation to rival God, the church scandalizes in a particularly hurtful way when its leaders yield to the temptation. Yet faith in Christ alone carries the promise of eternal abiding. Christ alone is our rock of safety, our hope.

In the Johannine bread of life pericope, we see that Jesus himself experienced the disillusionment of many disciples who, because they could not receive his prophetic word, “broke away and would not remain in his company any longer. Jesus then said to the Twelve, ‘Do you want to leave me too?’ Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life’” (Jn 6:66–68).

Jesus is ambiguous about the fate of his beloved disciple: “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?” But he is not ambiguous about his call to Peter: regardless of what might happen to the beloved disciple, “follow me!” The point is not to gauge our relationship with God and Jesus by what might or might not happen to the “beloved disciple,” but to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus and to walk in his ways: “Your ways, O Lord, make known to me; teach me your paths” (Ps 25:4)—a common trope of the liturgies in this penitential season of Lent.

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