

The Holodomor of 1933 - Spiritual Reflections

Hope

The Holodomor of 1933, perpetrated against the Ukrainian nation, has no other precedent in terms of the extent.

*All this has come upon us,
though we have not forgotten thee,
or been false to thy covenant.
Our heart has not turned back,
nor have our steps departed from thy way,
that thou shouldst have broken us in the place of jackals,
and covered us up with deep darkness. (Psalm 44:17-19)*

*Hope requires the contender
Who sees no virtue in surrender.
From the cradle to the bier,
The heart must persevere. The Book of Counted Joys*

Hope is a necessary component to being human. All tyrants, all who commit crimes against humanity always attack hope and take it away from the victims because they know how important hope is for humans, for remaining human. Hope is indelibly connected to the future and when hope is removed, the future becomes clouded over with uncertainty and pain. Removing hope removes time, a precious gift from God which enables us to be and to grow and to pray and to forgive.

*When we don't allow ourselves to hope,
we don't allow ourselves to have purpose.
Without purpose, without meaning, life is dark.
We've no light within, and we're just living to die.
From the Corner of His Eye, Dean Koontz.*

What hope enables us is to see life and its vagaries from a different perspective. It is, to a certain extent to see beyond ourselves and beyond our immediate needs. It is to be convinced, in spite of the seemingly contrary evidence, that good does triumph over evil, the final word in creation is not to be given to despair. It is to see value through all the bitterness that life sometimes brings. It is to rejoice in the very depths of our mysterious being and not just to be satisfied by the ephemeral, that which is transitory. It is to place our hope in the One who is greater than we and whose victory we await.

What a horrendous sight it was in 1933 to see people swollen from hunger, collapsing, dying and no respite in sight. It is almost as if the whole world has forgotten and this makes the pain of dying in obscurity even more profound.

*...how intimately and inextricably the tendrils of
tragedy and joy were intertwined in life.
Sorrow was often the root of future joy,
and joy could be the seed of sorrow yet to come.
From the Corner of His Eye, Dean Koontz.*

Hope is one of the virtues of Christianity. And yet, how can we talk about hope when confronted by the sheer evil that accompanied the year 1933?

If we stop calling on hope then we have given victory to those who take away hope. We have hope because we have seen that it is eventually the conqueror of all despair and loss of faith. It was with hope that Christ approached his Passion, and we were given a powerful sign to support that hope - the Resurrection. The Ukrainian nation has also resurrected and become free some 58 years after the horrific events of 1933.

The darkest night is pierced by the smallest candle and this signifies to us the power of what is good, the power of that which resists evil. But, one could say, how do we know that those who died had not lost hope? And here, we come to one of the central mysteries of our faith. The existence of the Church shows that we are never separated from our brothers and sisters. In some mysterious and profound manner, we are united, we are part of each other and it is through this union that we can hope for those who have gone on before us. We, through the Church, can stand in for them, and hope the hope that others have wrenched away from them during their earthly existence.

*All human lives are so profoundly and intricately entwined -
those dead, those living, those generations to come -
that the fate of all is the fate of each,
and the hope of humanity rests in every heart
and in every pair of hands.....
for each of us is a thread critical to the strength...
of the human tapestry. From the Corner of His Eye, Dean Koontz.*

This may seem fanciful but we have support for this idea in the findings that science has made about nature. In some mysterious manner, particles which seem to be very far from each other, yet impact and interact with each other. If we have this at the inanimate level, then does it not seem even more likely at the level of humanity?

We are in a privileged position because through our physical eyes we have seen that their loss has not been in vain. There are rich fruits from their suffering among which is that the Ukrainian nation will never ever again have to endure the unimaginable suffering at the hands of others. We are at last free and we can control our fate as other peoples control theirs and this is due, in no small measure, to those who have preceded us. It is another irony that they who had seemingly lost hope, have passed it on to us as a gift for us. And what a difficult gift hope is

sometimes for us to hold onto.

My God, my God why hast Thou forsaken me? are words that come easily to us. Despair is a currency that our fallen world uses too often. This is one of those ironic gifts of a great tragedy that it blesses us with hope. This is one of the reasons why we commemorate this tragedy because it is not totally about loss and death, but it also brings with it life and hope.

*If you do not hope,
you will never discover
what lies beyond hope. Clement of Alexandria*

We hope because our vision is not limited by what we can see, what the world tries to tell us. We know through our faith, that there is much more to life and reality than our physical eyes can observe. The lynch pin of our faith is the Resurrection which assures us that the final word in the cosmos is not despair - the antithesis of hope - but joy and redemption. No matter how dark the situation may seem, through our eyes of faith we see the Good beyond all our suffering.

Hope was almost totally annihilated in Ukraine of 1933. As someone mentioned, there were no birds to sing. And yet, God had given his gifts to men. The earth produced a harvest which was more than sufficient. But men's hands denied bread to other men. And here, again, there is a deep irony.

The concept of bread is one that is central to the New Testament. Christ is the bread of life; he brings redemption through his sacrificial death and we commemorate this, and actually participate in his death and Resurrection, for it is in the Eucharist wherein the bread of the world is transformed into the food of eternity. 1933 witnessed a savage attack on Ukrainians but it was also an attack on faith because bread is one of the enduring symbols of Christianity. There was a fanatic attempt to exterminate any vestiges of faith and hope. And initially it seemed that evil had won. But the wheels of history and judgement turn slowly but inexorably and hope has once again been returned to the Ukrainian people.

*I don't know how
But suddenly, there is no darkness left at all.
The sun has poured itself inside me
From a thousand wounds.
Nikiphores Vrettakos, Greek Poet*

Hope is a signpost for us that what underlies creation is a mystery. Even our study of the physical properties of the cosmos points this out to us – there is a limit to what can be known about physical creation and this limit does not arise because our instruments are imperfect, but it arises from the fact that there is an inherent unknowability about reality. Hope blesses us with a future because if there were no mystery, there would be no future and we would be locked into a rigid determinism. Hope is one of the basic building blocks of creation and without it, we would

not have a world of love and meaning.