

Sermon Advent 3 Year B 2017

The first words in today's liturgy are from Paul's letter to the Philippians: *Rejoice ye in the Lord always, and again, I say, Rejoice!* These are the words that have been sung on this day for centuries. It is from the *very* first word – rejoice – that this Sunday takes its traditional name: Gaudete Sunday. Now, as we come to this third Sunday of Advent, the third candle is lit and just on a week from now we shall gather here and celebrate the birth of our Lord. The mood of anticipation, of eager expectation, grows! On this third Sunday, the mood of *quiet* expectation gives way to more *joyous* expectation. In so many Christmas decorations are the words: love, peace, hope. But also Joy. And that is right and good.

The note of joy is carried through all our readings today. We see it in the first reading from Isaiah - the prophet of the Advent season - whose words and images we turn back to again and again at this time. Isaiah had been charged to bring hope to the people of God, to set before them a vision of restoration, of return, of God's faithful care. In the reading today, God's people are clothed in wedding garments, a symbol of joy, then as today. This image of the wedding garment is all the more significant because it points to Israel's renewed *closeness* with God. It celebrates the bond – the distinct, unique, intimate closeness Israel has with God. This *closeness* is the cause of Israel's joy. It is this *intimacy*, this bond, that explodes with energy, with life: *"For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations."* The joy that comes from closeness with God brings *life*.

Now, of course the world around us and life in general is filled with reasons to keep us down and to hold us back, to call and distract us from that closeness. Read a newspaper, watch the news, keep up to date with so-called current affairs is enough to lead even the sanest person into depression and despair. Yet one of the most important things we can do as people of faith is to live in hope. And in part that is seen in keeping our sight firmly on the world to come. Not as pie in the sky when you die kind of wishful thinking. But in looking in hope to the joy *that is to come* ought to inspire us, motivate us to make that joy present *here and now*. It is only by looking in hope to the joy to come that we are properly motivated to realise the vision communicated in the opening portion of Isaiah today: bringing good news to the poor, binding up the broken hearted, proclaiming liberty to captives.

That's why Christians are interested in social action. That's why we care for the poor, educate the young, feed the hungry, nurture the sick, advocate for refugees, care for the homeless, speak for the voiceless, defend the vulnerable. Not as ends in themselves. Not to create social utopias. Not to create an air of respectability so we become accepted by wider society; that they might tolerate our good works, even as they despise our faith. No. We engage in all these things so that through our love and care the love and care of God can be seen and known. We are seeking to bring something of the joy of heaven to earth below. Our joy on earth taps into, points to and anticipates the joy of heaven. Simply, it is get this world ready for heaven. The joy of heaven we can taste now. It is the call of the Christian to share that.

Now, the Epistle portion today calls the Thessalonian community Paul addresses to rejoice with as much eloquence and passion as does his letter to the Philippians. Paul writes, *"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."*

And, once more we encounter John the Baptist in the Gospel. We can just see the Baptist as this weird hairy guy, calling us to repentance and conversion, and tricky stuff like that. But at the same time, we can see him as an icon of joy. Now all the gospel writers cloak the story of John in old testament prophecies, of a voice crying in the wilderness, of someone who was coming to prepare the way, who would make straight in the desert a highway. And John is recognised as this figure. He is a cause of joy because *God's hand was at last plainly acting in history* again. It is through the life and work of Jesus Christ we not only see and recognise this hand of God at work, but we see the kind of world God has in mind for us. When that vision is realised – what Jesus called the kingdom, or the reign of God, good things are happening, our world is being transformed into God's image. That is the cause for joy!

At the same time, we look to John and of course we cannot miss his call to repentance. This is the constant and challenging theme of Christian life. Truly, *to realise* God's vision and dream for us and our world is to leave behind the sinful life and to start out on the path to a new, changed life. But this too is a word of hope for us! Because in this we recognise that there is hope for us all! We do not need to be stuck in our sins, in our bad patterns of behaviours, in lives that are less than they should be. John reminds us we can be something more! God has a bigger plan for our lives! This gives us joy!

John looks to and points toward this new order, the new creation, the coming light. In Isaiah we see how closeness and intimacy with God brings joy and life. But the gospel writer, too, sees in the Baptist the one who witnesses to the Light, *the dawn of something new*. with John we are to look to this coming light, to turn away from darkness and toward the light. Now, some writers have suggested that the colour of today's vestments highlight this idea. The peculiar rose-coloured vestments (which we dig out only twice a year) suggests how the dark violet of night gives way to the rose tinges of the pre-dawn, which finally change into the bright gold of the day. The rose we wear today looks to the gold of Christmas day when we celebrate the coming of Christ the Rising Son. we look and see the Rising Son and our hearts are hearts are filled with joy.

Just as Isaiah recognised the reason for Israel donning its wedding garments - for its joy - would be its restored closeness with God, so at this time we are reminded that the source of our joy is Christ. And it is closeness/nearness to him that that joy takes hold. It is obvious, of course but it doesn't hurt to restate and remind ourselves of the obvious. Because mostly we are pretty thick and have a tendency to forget the obvious. And it seems we never tire of turning to cheap imitation, easy thrills of every boring and crass and mind-numbing variation in exchange for true, lasting joy. But our challenge as believers must be to trust that, yes, Christ is the source of our joy and for us to say with Paul, *Rejoice, the Lord is near*.

It is a great theological and spiritual truth, that the closer we come to God, the *nearer* we allow him to come to us, the deeper, more profound the more lasting our joy. Saint Augustine in his spiritual autobiography 'Confessions', identified this perfectly when he said, *our hearts are restless, O God, until they find their rest in thee*. For people of faith this makes perfect sense: *our hearts are restless, O God, until they find their rest in thee*. Because, with God as both our origin and our destiny, the closer we come to God, the more we become our truer, more real selves. The searching questions asked of the Baptist - Who are you? What is your identity? - are of course the questions asked of each of us.

Every serious thinker, every person who takes their *own* lives seriously must ask these question of themselves. For the Christian it to ought come simply for us: who we are is answered in reference to Christ. The nearer we come to him, draw to him, the deeper, more lasting our joy. We wake up to ourselves by waking up to God, and in that lay our true joy. *Rejoice: indeed, the Lord is near. Amen.*