

### Sermon Advent 3 Year B 2020

Somewhat inexplicably, when I returned from my leave this week, I had a profound urge to set up my Christmas tree and to put up my Christmas decorations. Now of course for many people this would not be that unusual and plenty of people have been celebrating as if it's been Christmas since November. But growing up in my family, the tree, and the Christmas crib and all the rest, only ever went up on the last weekend before Christmas. And that, I imagine, an echo of the much stricter European tradition of the festive decorations only being put in place on Christmas Eve.

But this year – and I know I am no alone in this – it seemed appropriate to get in early, to squeeze out of this season as much *joy* as possible. I have in heard in many places of people just wanting to go 'all out'. Christmas - with all its gaudy colours, its beauty, the memories it evokes, its lights, and the promise of celebration - this year at least, stands as a defiant gesture to the year we've had. And as I unpacked my tree and placed all the decorations I have collected over the years from many parts of the globe, I am not afraid to admit that I allowed myself to be transported to that place of sentimentality and memory and recollection and indeed joy. Because I think we need to not only make room for joy but to intentionally foster it. Let a note of joy be the last one sounded as we leave this year behind us.

The introit sentence for the mass for this third Sunday of Advent – as it has on this day for many, many centuries - states, *Rejoice in the Lord alway: and again I say, rejoice. Let your moderation be known unto all men. The Lord is at hand.*

*Rejoicing* is a particular action of faith. It is not a word often spoken in common, secular usage. And *rejoicing* is more than celebration. It more than festive commemoration. It is not an invitation to party or to just have a good time. It is anchored, of course, in an understanding *joy*. In his letter to the Philippians, where the Introit Sentence comes from, St Paul presents rejoicing as linked to a sense of hope: *rejoice... the Lord is at hand*. And so, we find two of the great themes or motifs of this season joined together: joy and hope. The *joy* we have as Christians cannot be separated from the *hope* we have. And the joy we have as Christians is not based on some vague, lovey-dovey, feel-good sentiment. The cause of our rejoicing is the hope we have in Christ, that the Lord is near, that he is, in Paul's words *at hand*.

This is why Christian joy is such a powerful sign of witness. It can be for us a sign of contradiction, something which marks us out. Because whatever might be happening about and around us, our hope remains. The superficial and passing circumstances of life cannot sabotage this. Personal crisis, scandals, the highs and lows of life, the good times and the bad, even global pandemics, should not be able to dent the spirit of Christian joy, because our hope remains. Whatever whirlwind might be encircling us, we can stand fast because our hope, our trust, our meaning, our value, our confidence *does not rest* in what is about us! It rests in Christ, *the same yesterday, today and forever.*

The ability of the Christian to remain unshaken in hope whatever the vicissitudes of life throws at us is a powerful witness because most people actually just live on the surface, live for the moment, live within the limited horizon of this life. So, the hope that is within us should shine through us! Our joy should be seen, noticeable! Not that we are immune from the griefs of life and the normal range of human emotion. Of course not! And joy certainly isn't a Pollyanna approach to life, all smiles and sunbeams. Joy is not to be confused with either optimism or even happiness. An entire self-help industry has been constructed around the fleeting notions of happiness. But joy is, if you like, the stamp upon us which shows that the troubles and turmoils of this life do not have the last word over us, that we look to something – indeed Someone Else – and that we approach life with a long horizon, the horizon of eternity.

But it also means that few things can witness more *negatively* to the truth of the faith than the joy-less Christian. Those who profess Christian faith with a long face, and who find little or no joy in the wonder of life and the graces of God do a great harm to the integrity of Christian witness. Teresa of Avila somewhat famously said, 'From silly devotions and sour-faced saints, good Lord, deliver us'. To that I would say, Amen! There are enough sour faced people in the world without Christians adding to them!

*Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, rejoice... The Lord is at hand.* Now, this call to joy and rejoicing might appear somewhat at odds with the figure of John the Baptist once more placed before us on this third Sunday of Advent. Here we are, half through our Advent journey, and not even a whisper yet of Mary and Joseph or baby Jesus. Not a sight of shepherds, angels or stars. Instead, we remain on the banks of the Jordan River to hear again the confronting words of the Baptist. *A voice that cried in the wilderness. Make straight the way of the Lord.*

However, John really is in complete harmony with the idea we have been considering, of that connection between joy and hope. John, we know from the synoptic gospels - and as you heard in the gospel last week - had at the heart of his message the call to repentance. In today's gospel portion this is expressed, in the words of Isaiah as, *make straight the way of the Lord*. In other words, leave the paths that diverge and lead away from the Lord. Come back to the one way – the straight and narrow path – the path that leads to truth and life.

It is a great theological and spiritual truth, that the closer we come to God, the closer we allow him to come to us, and the more deep, more profound, the more elating 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 until they find their rest in Him. Because God is both our origin and our destiny, then the closer we come to God, the more we come to be the creatures we were made to be.

We have known this past year - perhaps more so than other years - of things that could have sapped the joy from us. Which is why in my report for the AGM (if you bothered to read it or haven't forgotten it) I was careful to highlight the small achievements, the hidden blessings of this past year. As Christians we have to look past the surface of things. We must look to the deeper patterns. We must learn to discern the hand of God at work. And we must cultivate the disciplines that give us a truly Christian perspective on things.

There is no shortage of other voices seeking to form our hearts and minds and habits. No shortage of voices which will undermine and weaken a Christian view of things. And resist those voices we must! But perhaps not so much with the oppositional fist-waving and finger-wagging and grim-faced stance which is the default for many of us. Perhaps instead we could respond to the opposing voices about us, and trouble and turmoils of life, with joy, by making joy our protest.

We do have something positive to offer the world. We do have a different view of things. We do have good news to proclaim, in fact the very best news there is! And we do propose a way of life that leads to human flourishing. Let us make sure, then, that we do that with the note of joy. Amen.