

Readings for the Third Sunday of Advent

15th December 2024

First Reading: Zephaniah 3:14-20

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;

shout, O Israel!

Rejoice and exult with all your heart,

O daughter Jerusalem!

The LORD has taken away the judgments against you,

he has turned away your enemies.

The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst;

you shall fear disaster no more.

On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:

Do not fear, O Zion;

do not let your hands grow weak.

The LORD, your God, is in your midst,

a warrior who gives victory;

he will rejoice over you with gladness,

he will renew you in his love;

he will exult over you with loud singing

as on a day of festival.

I will remove disaster from you,

so that you will not bear reproach for it.

I will deal with all your oppressors

at that time.

And I will save the lame

and gather the outcast,

and I will change their shame into praise

and renown in all the earth.

At that time I will bring you home,

at the time when I gather you;

for I will make you renowned and praised

among all the peoples of the earth,

when I restore your fortunes

before your eyes, says the LORD.

Second Reading: Philippians 4:4-7

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Gospel: St Luke 3:7-18

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptised by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptised, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptise you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

A Reflection for the Third Sunday of Advent

Today, on the third Sunday of Advent, we come to the third of our Advent themes. Having looked at 'hope' and 'peace', we now turn our attention to 'joy'. Helpfully, we have two readings that exhort us to 'Rejoice!', reminding us that the Lord is with us. 'Rejoice and exult with all your heart' said Zephaniah, 'the Lord is in your midst'. 'Rejoice in the Lord always' said Paul, 'The Lord is near'. Immediately, it is made clear to us that Christian joy is to do with God's presence.

Last week, when Fr David wrote about peace, he mentioned the robin who was his companion as he planted a blackthorn hedge recently. I am sure that any of us who enjoy gardening will, like me, have immediately pictured this endearing and cheeky little bird who is so often around whenever we do any digging. David spoke of the robin as an encounter with God in the natural world, and I would agree. Having a robin around always brings a smile to my face, it evokes joy. There is something carefree about robins, not bowed down by the worries of the world, but just hopping about in the hope that you will turn up a few tasty morsels. And its very presence lifts the spirits. It will

do the same again in February. As the days start to stretch out, we will be serenaded by wonderful birdsong from trees and hedgerows, a song that is astonishingly loud; in my experience, it is nearly always a robin.

As we have already seen this Advent with hope and peace, Christian joy is a gift from God that is rooted in God's character and God's promises. It is not simply an emotion, not as simple as happiness – we can be full of joy without being happy. Fulness of joy is to know we are in God's presence. God is the only thing that can fill us with such joy.

'Rejoice in the Lord always', Paul said. It's an imperative, an instruction, something that Christians are required to do. That joy fills this whole letter, yet Paul wrote it when he was in prison, facing a capital charge, although scholars are uncertain whether that was in Ephesus, Corinth or Rome. We all know that believing in God doesn't remove the harsher realities of life, it doesn't remove sickness or pain, broken relationships, anger, or poverty and other material struggles. Indeed, like Paul, many followers of Christ have found that obedience to God has led to heartbreak, pain and even death. In that sense, the Christian life doesn't look very joyful.

But Christian joy is not reliant on the world, or the circumstances that surround us. Instead, it is totally dependent on God's love for us; love that knows our pain and sorrow, and all our shortcomings, yet loves us unconditionally. Christian joy is rooted in closeness to God. Yes, darkness, sorrow and fear may be real, and we should never deny those things. But we are invited to pour them out to God, to entrust them to God.

Paul says, 'Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, make your requests be made known to God.' There's the invitation: tell God what concerns you. I am the first to acknowledge that it's hard not to worry about the challenges and hardships we face. Yes, I may give something over to God, but then, rather than leave it with God, I metaphorically take it back again to have another worry over it. I think we all probably need to practise handing things over to God, and then leaving them alone in his care. Then, as Paul continues, 'the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus'.

To live a life of Christian joy is to focus on God rather than ourselves, and to live in obedience to God's will. Joy is to know that our purpose in life is more than having the good opinion of others, but is about doing the right thing. It's about acting rightly for the benefit of others and for future generations, even though we may not experience that benefit ourselves. Joy is to allow our hearts to sing, even when things may appear to be falling apart around us.

In John's Gospel (15:10-11), Jesus said: 'If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.'

Some of you may have read C S Lewis's book *Surprised by Joy*. It's an autobiographical account of his early life which describes his conversion from atheism to Christianity, a faith he once shared with his brother and parents but which he had denounced and rejected as a teenager. And yet, he found himself longing for and searching for the joy he had experienced as a boy, which he described as a recovery of child-like wonder at the world and its mysteries, and a search for security and settledness. His was largely an intellectual journey that took him through literature, Norse mythology, atheism, various Eastern beliefs and ancient Greek ethics. But he eventually found what he was looking for where he least expected it, or perhaps where he least wanted to find it. He famously described himself as 'the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England'.

Lewis's description of joy as child-like wonder, and a sense of security and settledness is something I find helpful. Babies and young children have an innate sense of wonder at the world around them. Children who grow up in a loving family environment have a security and a carefree-ness: they know they are loved and provided for and they live in the moment, rather like the robin I began with, enjoying life', which is not to say that they don't experience times of pain or distress, as of course they do. As we grow, somehow, we lose that wonder and that carefree-ness, and yet, that is the relationship we are invited into with God. Child-like, note, not childish.

In Luke's Gospel (18:17), Jesus said: 'Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it'. So simple, and yet we find it so tricky. But we have an ever-patient and loving God who invites us, again, to place our burdens in his care, and to know the joy of being God's beloved children, the only thing that really matters. Let us rejoice together – the Lord is near!