

Third Sunday of Advent - December 17, 2017

Readings: Isaiah 61:1-2, 10-11; 1 Thess 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28

Rejoice because the Lord is near, is the theme that permeates the entire liturgy of this Sunday. It is not a question of a superficial happiness or a passing excitement because Christmas is coming, but it is the joy of salvation. Salvation is glad tidings given to all the people of the universe and more particularly to the poor and lowly. The third Sunday of Advent is called Gaudete (meaning rejoice) Sunday inviting all Christians to rejoice at all times. It is a command taken directly from Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians, as in today's second reading, to rejoice always because the Lord is near. It is a positive command, one that we are to keep at all times and in all circumstances. Today's liturgy indicates that in the joy, salvation and a more just and human world are somehow interconnected. It is not the pursuit of human happiness and fulfillment, or of social justice, that brings salvation; rather, the salvation that comes from on high, enables us to be instrumental in bringing about a more just world and to find the joy that no one can take away. In the first reading Prophet Isaiah presents the special servant who receives the spirit of God. He has the task of proclaiming the Good News to the poor, to bind the broken hearts and bring liberty to all. In the second reading Paul while inviting the people to rejoice in the Lord, encourages them to live a lifestyle in keeping with their vocation as Christians. The joy spoken of by Paul is a gift of the Holy Spirit and we must pray for it. In the Gospel of today we learn the role of John the Baptist is to bear witness to Jesus. He tells the people that he is not Messiah and he himself is not worthy to untie the lace of his shoes.

In the first reading of today we recognize God's prophetic and symbolic language that was being spoken through Prophet Isaiah. In this reading a servant of God thrills at the new task given by God to him. In an earlier oracle the Prophet gave a warning to nations that formed alliances and made plans not confirmed by the spirit of God. The sad consequences of these policies are clearly exhibited in the vocabulary of this reading. The prophet addresses the captives and the prisoners of such failed human policies. The servant of God now proclaims freedom and healing to a weary people. Justice will prevail where prudent and ignorance once ruled. The servant describes the new relationship between God and people as a royal wedding. Bride and groom wear jewels and crowns. In this spiritual union their robes are fashioned of salvation and justice. The life-giving transformation within the nation is compared to the change in seasons when the earth, once

covered by dull grays and browns of winter bursts forth with bright colours of spring garden. This imagery also reverses the conditions that prevailed earlier with the neglect of land because of the warfare.

In the Second Reading Paul invites us always to rejoice, to pray without ceasing, to give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for us. We should always rejoice because God has done great things for us in our life. We should always pray to secure our daily communion with the Lord God. We should always give thanks because all things come from God for the purpose of our sanctification as His children. We should do this in the name of Jesus because it is through Christ, the only Mediator between God and man, that we receive our salvation. During the season of Advent, we are reminded of the purpose of the preparation and the reason for the joy, namely, the truly joyful occasion of the birth of Jesus. Then, we are told not to quench the Spirit, meaning not to block his inspirations in our hearts. Jesus gave us the indwelling Holy Spirit to sanctify us. Through the Spirit of God, we learn to respect the words of the prophets because in the Holy Scriptures we find the promises of God the Father. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we have the ability to test everything, perceiving what is good so we may hold fast to it. We have the ability to perceive what is evil so we may abstain from it. The Holy Spirit is our Teacher, our Guide, and our Comforter, the source of Divine knowledge, understanding and wisdom. Through the Spirit of the God of peace, it is God Himself who sanctifies us entirely, soul, spirit and body. It is by His power through the Church Sacraments that we keep our soul and body sound and blameless until the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In today's Gospel Reading, the word of God tells us that God sent John the Baptist with a special divine mission, as a witness to announce the coming of the Light that is found in Jesus Christ. The poetic prologue to the Gospel of John is interrupted by the insertion of the reference to John the Baptist. This Gospel in fact wants to show the close relationship between Jesus and John but it does not give John the title the Baptizer. It is within the context of light and darkness that the reference to John is made. However, his purpose was clearly limited to one function, namely, to testify to the Light. He told his audience that he is not the light, but the one who bears witness to the light. Further John the Baptist testified that he was the voice crying in the wilderness, telling all those who came to him, to prepare themselves for the coming of the Lord. He proclaimed to the people a baptism of repentance by water, and gave testimony that the year of the Lord's

favour had now arrived. He told them that he not the Messiah or a prophet. At the same time John also testified in humility that he was not worthy to untie the thong of His sandal, of the one who was coming after him. So great was the Divine Presence of the Lord, the King of kings, that John the Baptist felt unworthy to even to perform the task of a slave. These words echo the spiritual attitude that we should embrace during the season of advent as we wait for the coming of Jesus.

The Gospel of today explains the role of John the Baptist perhaps to overcome some misunderstandings that existed mainly among the followers of John, which continued to remain close to John's teaching even after the death of Jesus, and hoped that John might be the Messiah. Mark emphasizes the fact that John was sent by God as a messenger and there was the close relationship between the two. The evangelist did not surely aim to reconstruct the historical John. He is clarifying the faith perspective of Christians on John's role in relationship with Jesus. He has two different groups, the priests and the Levites on the one hand and the Pharisees on the other questioning about his authenticity. It is clear that the religious leaders in Jerusalem were puzzled as to John's role and identity. This gives John the opportunity to clarify him and to flatly deny any claims of being the Messiah. He told them that he is not Elijah who had been taken up into heaven and was expected to return to prepare the way of the Lord. Nor was he a prophet like Moses, expectations of whose return was discussed in some circles. This is equal to denying any possible connection to a messianic connection of any kind. Drawing a slightly modified version of Prophet Isaiah chapter 40, John defined his role as the voice of the one crying in the desert. He bore witness and he pointed to another who was in fact the Messiah, and was already among them. He further declared his total unworthiness before him and told them that they could not compare him to the person of Jesus. John's answer was startling, unique and beautiful. He clarified his special role to the people and gave a special place to Jesus in his life. He told them that he was called upon to Baptize with water and present as one who prepares the way of the Lord. Stressing on the dignity of Jesus, John said that he is not even worthy to untie the sandals of the Messiah.

John's testimony was surely the world shaking news. He was called upon to bear witness to the light and tell the world that God's eternal plan for man is being implemented and the incarnation of his divine son has already taken place. There

was the invitation to repent and to have a change of heart to re-enter into the mystery of the Trinity. For over two thousand years God has been preparing the world of man for this staggering event. He chose Abraham and a whole nation granting them the prophets to prepare for his coming. John was the last of the great line of Prophets and as Jesus himself says he was the greatest of them all. He had the privilege to point out to the audience the Son of God in human nature, indicating the Lamb of God who would take the sins away. He was privileged to listen to the God's voice at the river Jordan when Jesus was baptized. He was surely the man sent by God. John was sent not only for his contemporaries, for the Jews of his day, but for people of all time. Over the past two thousand years the good news of Jesus reached grater part of human kind. However like the group that came to John to question about his teaching and work have been present in every generation. Like the Pharisees of those days people often are controlled by pride, self-centeredness and self-righteousness. The modern age makes them feel that God is not necessary in the world of today. Let us listen to the call of John the Baptist and respond to the God who is coming to us.

Life of John the Baptist, despite his sacrifices and hardships was full of joy that is if we define joy as a state of bliss over having or expecting something or someone that you love. In this sense Christianity is a way of life in Joy, which is not a passive waiting for the coming of Christ but an active participation in his presence. As Paul places before us the three pieces of good advice that summarizes our Christian life: rejoice, pray and render thanks. We rejoice in the glorious presence of God among us particularly in the Eucharist. We pray as Jesus did to keep ourselves in union with God in the Trinity. We express our gratitude to him who has placed on us multitude of gratuitous gifts. That is why St Augustine tells us that a Christian should be an Alleluia from head to foot. St John of the Cross says that the soul of one who serves God always swims in Joy, always keeps holiday, and is always in mood for singing. Today we are invited to be joy-filled witnesses of Jesus like John the Baptist and to be rays of sunshine in the darkness of the world.

We heard the word of God today. These beautiful texts we heard proclaimed to us in their totality remind us that true joy and happiness is to be found only in God. If we are not finding our joy and happiness in God we are under an illusion and sooner or later God will give us the painful grace of allowing that illusion to

give way to reality. God is the answer. Only in God can we find true joy and happiness. Those who abandon God are on the road to sorrow and pain. Advent reminds us that the joyful answer to our problems lies in God. So when Jesus summarized the first three commandments as loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength he was really giving us a prescription for deep and permanent joy and happiness. Any unhappiness we experience is really an experience of the lack of God. God is the fulfillment of our anxieties and worries, of our needs, of our greed. As we prepare to celebrate Christmas and the coming of God into our lives through Jesus we need also to remind ourselves that we have been called to be the means to bring Jesus into other people's lives. It is indeed necessary to have Christ at the center of a Merry Christmas. Christ is the one and only gift at the center of a Merry Christmas.

During the season of Advent we see John's role that is very similar to ours. On the one hand, we come after Jesus and are the beneficiaries of his being among us, sharers in the life he has brought. On the other hand, it is our role to go before him, clearing the way so that he may come into the lives of other people. This is our apostolic, our evangelizing responsibility. Like John, we are not the Light but we are called, by our baptism, to bear witness to the Light by all we say and do. This has to be manifested in our daily lives living as persons who prepare the way of the Lord. Again as Paul invites us to manifest the sense of joy in our heart and to rejoice in the Lord because he is coming and is close to us. The first reading through the Prophet tells us to proclaim freedom and bring about healing to the weary people. Let us make our preparation of Christmas a happy waiting for the Lord who is coming to us, who has already come and is certain to come again. The joy of Jesus, the joy of Christmas can only be ours to the extent that we work with Jesus to bring that joy into the lives of others too. The place where Jesus is waiting to meet us is particularly in the Eucharist which is a celebration of Joy. We also discover him in the person of the poor, and of those long suffering physical or moral imprisonment – even prisons of their own making. If we bring them joy this Christmas, we ourselves will find that joy for ourselves.

A holy man living on the banks of river Yamuna has a disciple who always asked him to give him the experience of God. Having stayed with him for ten years he left the Master to go to the Himalayas and experience God. He spent there 15 years and returned to the old Guru to explain to him how he prayed there and learnt yogic powers. He took the Guru and others to the river. There with his

yoga powers he walked on the water to the other side and came back. All present there admired him but not the Guru. He told him that he had taken fifteen years to walk on water and return. Here the people do the same paying one Anna to the boatman. He would have found God here and experienced him if he truly served people and discovered God in them.

Years ago, a fishing fleet went out from a small harbor on the east coast of Newfoundland. In the afternoon there came a great storm. When night settled down, not a single vessel of all the fleet had found its way into the port. All night long, wives, mothers, children and sweethearts paced up and down the beach, wringing their hands and calling on God to save their loved ones. To add to the horror of the situation, one of the cottages caught fire. Since the men were all away, it was impossible to save the home. Everything in the house was destroyed. When the morning broke, to the joy of all, the entire fleet found safe harbor in the bay. But there was not a single face with a picture of despair except the wife of the man whose home had been destroyed. Meeting her husband as he landed, she cried, oh, husband, we are ruined. Our home and all it contained was destroyed by fire." But the man exclaimed, "Thank God for the fire. It was the light of our burning cottage that guided the whole fleet into port."

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