

Third Sunday of Advent December 16, 2018
Zephaniah 3:14-18; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:10-18

On this third Sunday of Advent the church invites us to rejoice and prepare ourselves for the coming of the Saviour. The first word of the Antiphon is Gaudete, meaning rejoice and the entire texts of the Mass are filled with the expressions of joy and jubilation. Even the vestment colour is changed from the original purple to rose or pink. The entrance antiphon starts with the word: "Rejoice in the Lord always." The First Reading from the prophet Zephaniah tells the faithful to shout for joy, and to rejoice and exult with all their hearts. The Lord will renew them with his love and will be present among them. The responsorial psalm tell us to sing and shout for joy for the Holy One of Israel is in their midst. In the Second Reading, St Paul invites the Christians of Philippi to be happy in the Lord and to remain always in that happiness. The reason for this is that the Lord is near in their proximity. The Gospel brings the people to the awareness of the expectancy of the coming of the Saviour and the need for the immediate preparation for the coming of the King who will remain among us. Here we have John the Baptist surrounded by anxious and waiting group of people. They are worried and are unsure about the future. John is there to guide them, to advise them of practical ways and baptize them. Soon Jesus will come to change everything and fill them with Joy. That is what we celebrate today.

Today's readings are a continuation of our preparation for the coming of the Lord Jesus. This truth can be perceived three different ways: It commemorates incarnation of God on earth through the birth of Christ Jesus; it represents our appearing before the Lord at the end of this life; and it represents the final coming of the Lord Jesus in full glory at the end of times. The readings tell us that Christian joy or happiness is deep down in the heart and is not incompatible with physical and emotional pain or difficult external circumstances. Joy is the gift of God to those whom he has specially chosen. It is, as Jesus says it is the gift which he personally gives and it is something that no one can take away from us. The problem is that we identify our happiness with people or things we don't have and often can't have. However, with Jesus joy is spiritual and a blessing that he gives us.

In the first reading we have prophet Zephaniah preaching the word of God to the people of Jerusalem. This was a period of religious degradation. The pure monotheism of Moses was forgotten and pagan idols were worshipped even in Jerusalem. Here the prophet announces

a remarkable change that is going to take place: that God is coming to be in the midst of the people. This has always been an ideal to the people of Israel. The prophet chastises the chosen people but at the same time gives them hope. With God being so close, the people of Jerusalem break into songs of Joy, a theme that opens and closes the reading. The prophet begins by stating, "Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!" The people are told to rejoice and exult in the most Sacred place of Jerusalem. The prophet now consoles them with the words saying that the Lord has taken away the judgments against them; he has turned away their enemies. Since the king of Israel is among them, they need to fear no one. Now that the Lord is in their midst, and spiritually present through the indwelling Divine Presence of the Holy Spirit, they no longer have to fear death and eternal punishment.

In the second reading we have the word of Paul to the Philippians' community, telling them to rejoice in the Lord always. This joy is because of the fruits of the Lord's glorious work. Each and every one of us has been called before creation to become the object of God's Divine Plan. What a joy it is to know that God has counted us among those He has chosen. The reason for the joy is obvious. Paul is looking for the final coming of Jesus. This will relieve our anxiety. Paul further adds that their gentleness be known to everyone. Gentleness is one of the nine fruit of the Holy Spirit as Paul tells the Galatians. When others are moved by the gentleness that flows from our humble beings, they are moved by the fruit of the Holy Spirit that flows through us for the glory of God. At the same time the Lord is close to us. His Spirit dwells within us when we are in a state of grace. So near is the Lord that during the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, we literally touch His physical Body. The Lord is with us! He has made His dwelling among us! Finally the coming of the Lord will bring us peace and to prayer so that we live in a spirit of thanksgiving and a spirit of thanks living.

Today's Gospel speaks of the expected coming of Jesus. This coming is being proclaimed by John the Baptist as he preaches by the waters of the River Jordan. He preaching of John the Baptist is directed to the crowds rather than to the Scribes and the Pharisees. His message has been one of radical change, a call to repentance, in the face of the coming of the messiah. After having heard what John had to say, the crowd wants to know what repentance requires. Contrary to what might have been expected, John does not want the people to abandon their current lives, flee the world and embrace the strict form of asceticism. Instead he asks them to reshape their character and

behaviour through adhering to God's call for justice within their current social structure. John the Baptist here confronts three groups of people: the ordinary people, tax collectors and soldiers. The ordinary people are to share their clothing and food with those who do not have; tax collectors are to stop extortion and stop cheating the people, and the soldiers are to carry out their duties in a fair way and be content with their pay. It is not just regret for the past but the shaping of a future just life. He does not suggest anything extra ordinary. After hearing such wise and sensible teaching, the people were beginning to wonder if John was not actually the Messiah himself.

The preaching of John the Baptist at River Jordan caused a stir all over Palestine. Many thought he was the Prophet. They had no Prophet from God for over 200 years. Others thought he was the long expected Messiah. The theme of his preaching was change of heart. He called them to turn to God and to things spiritual and forget every ambition they would have had, be it political or social. His call was to free them from their shortcomings and weaknesses and thus bring them to God. To all those who responded to him asked him of the areas of change he said that they have to be charitable to their needy neighbour and the rest would follow. John had a word to all classes of people but specifically he calls them to overcome injustices on their part and establish a good and just society. In one word he calls them all to be just in their behaviour.

Luke and other Gospel writers immediately make it clear that John is not the messiah. John, himself however, vehemently denies any messianic claim on his part and points to the one mightier than himself and who is the Messiah. John will not even be worthy to untie the laces of his sandals - the work of a slave for his master. He never reveals that Jesus as the person of Messiah which will be ultimately revealed by the Holy Spirit. John the Baptist says that the One who is to come would baptize them with the Holy Spirit and fire. That fire purifies what is good and destroys what is evil. Baptism with the Holy Spirit represents the Sacrament of Confirmation and the receiving of the indwelling Holy Spirit. It means to be sent forth to preach the Gospel to all. Baptism by fire means to be sanctified by the power of the Holy Spirit so that we may become holy children of God. John the Baptist ends his words saying, "His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.' This places a challenge on to discover what we are really today, wheat or the chaff. That is the question that we have to answer. That is the question that will make the big difference at His

coming. That is the difference that will determine if our presence before the Lord God will be a pleasant one or an unpleasant one. God calls us constantly to change for the better. God is always present to us to make such a change.

John the Baptist had just announced his mission to a few Jews who had come to listen to him. He had declared to them that his role consisted in preparing for the coming of the Messiah with a baptism of repentance. Everyone was to prepare for this coming, for this meeting with the Lord: their hearts and souls, along with their bodies and the entire world, were to be made ready to appear before He who IS the Eternal, the Creator of all things in Heaven and on earth. The response of the person depends upon one's will: man either does or does not want God to come and save him from his sins. If he is willing, then the grace of God gives man the power and strength necessary to obtain salvation. But if he is unwilling, then this grace is lost... John the Baptist preaches and proclaims the coming of the Messiah and those who want to carefully prepare for this event and ask what they must do to rectify themselves.

The mission of John the Baptist was to transform people and shape them in a spirit of holiness to be ready to accept the Lord. This holiness is something practical involving the daily lives of people. Holiness involves sharing our food with those who have none or very little. Holiness is finding those who are ashamed of their poverty and who will not come forward to ask for food. In the practical situation we may see the children starving because their parents are addicted to alcohol or drugs. These children in reality are hungry because of their parents' weakness. Holiness is not judgmental! It is full of compassion! It reaches out to those in need, those suffering, and those hungry. Holiness embraces honesty and helps us to become more in the likeness of Christ. This week let us ask in our hearts, whether we are ready for the coming of the Lord Jesus. We also ask whether we are ready to commemorate Christmas with a true spirit of holiness. We also ask the grace to be ready for the final coming of the Lord in a spirit of joy and happiness.

The Jews lived in expectation of the Messiah and awaited his coming. As the people questioned in their hearts concerning John, whether perhaps he were the Christ, John answered them all saying that he is baptizing them with water; but he who is mightier than him is coming, the thong of whose sandals he is not worthy to untie; he will baptize them with the Holy Spirit and with fire. John the Baptist does not

hesitate to humble himself before everyone present: he knows that he is not the Messiah. For he is not the supreme Judge: he is but a man, not God. Only God can judge the world, only God can send to the earth the retributive fire of his Spirit. He adds saying that he will baptize them with the Holy Spirit and with fire. John baptizes with water, water which purifies and which prepares hearts for the coming of the Messiah. But Christ baptizes with the Holy Spirit and with fire, a fire that punishes the guilty: those who do not want to believe in him, or who stop believing. The Messiah will do the task of gathering all those of good will to himself to place on to them the messianic hope. We need to listen to his message. This means that the judgment is already a reality and that the justice of God must be put into practice by all the men and women of the earth. The more that justice is practiced by men during their life on earth, the more that the Glory of God will shine in them for all eternity in Heaven!

The words of John the Baptist are very much alive even today. We are very much like the audience of his time. They asked him the question as to what they must do in order to change and enter into the divine stream. We have the answer from John and Jesus that we ought to change our lives. Our world of today is full of injustices and sad to say that the Christian countries who profess to be followers of Christ have gone into the abyss of secularism. This has led the community to enter into the celebrations of the year of faith as per the wishes of Holy Father. Here again Pope invites us to profess our Faith in the presence of God and become new evangelizers in the world. John announced in his days to prepare the way of the Lord and await the long promised messiah. The image of the Old Testament of cleansing and purifying is given to us even today. Let us pray God to grant us the grace to change ourselves and listen to his message that we may be his instruments in the proclamation of the Word.

A man once visited a temple under construction where he saw a sculptor making an idol of God. Suddenly he noticed a similar idol lying nearby. Surprised, he asked the sculptor, "Do you need two statues of the same idol?" "No," said the sculptor without looking up, "We need only one, but the first one got damaged at the last stage." The gentleman examined the idol and found no apparent damage. "Where is the damage?" he asked. "There is a scratch on the nose of the idol." said the sculptor, still busy with his work. "Where are you going to install the idol?" The sculptor replied that it would be installed on a pillar twenty feet high. "If the idol is that far, who is going to know that there is a scratch on the nose?" the gentleman asked. The sculptor stopped his work,

looked up at the gentleman, smiled and said, "I will know it." The desire to excel is exclusive of the fact whether someone else appreciates it or not. "Excellence" is a drive from inside, not outside.

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