

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday Advent (B)

17<sup>th</sup> December 2023

'Rejoice! — the Lord is near!'

Is 61: proclaim a year of favour from the Lord

*Magnificat*

1Th 5: never suppress the Spirit or treat the gift of prophecy with contempt

Jn 1: 6–8; 19–28: John the Baptist is asked, 'Who are you?'

It's *Gaudete* Sunday today — a Latin word that means, "Rejoice!" — and I think we've had the words 'joy' or 'rejoice' at least 20 times already in this Mass. This 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent, with its vivid, rose-pink, liturgical colour, brings with it a strong sense of that Advent joy of anticipation. Christmas is coming, now just 8 days away! In a year like 2023 when the world has continued to suffer such a number of upsets — political and economic turmoil, and indeed wars — still the Church proclaims the *joy* of *Gaudete* Sunday, and the even greater joy of Christmas to come. We need that joy, for sure!

It's called *Gaudete* Sunday because of the *Introit*, the entrance antiphon, words taken from St Paul (Phil 4): "*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice. Indeed, the Lord is near.*" Yes, says St Paul: "rejoice in the Lord *always.*" *Always*, not sometimes; *always*, not just when you feel like it; *always*, not just in (what you consider)

good times; *always*, because the Lord is the source of all joy, all consolation. There is no joy that does not come from God; just as there is no being, no existence, no goodness, that does not derive from the Creator. By exercising a gentle joy, even in the most testing of times, we witness to our faith in God; that the trials of this human life are not all there is, and that something far greater, far more joyful, is beyond. When I was in the parish, perhaps the greatest festive joy of all was to go to the nativity plays and carol services of the children of my two Primary Schools — the joy of anticipating Christmas in song was palpable and infectious!

Some people seem to have lost that joy of childhood. They'd like to preach a message of doom and gloom in this 1<sup>st</sup> century of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium, rather than a message of joy. We have had a war-torn past century, of ethnic violence and of great famines; we do see crime and violence, drug addictions and new and wasting diseases. That age-old question comes to haunt us: 'How does a good God allow so much suffering in the world?' But

there's an opposite of that question: 'How come there's so much good in the world?' There are good things being done day by day by almost every living creature. We never hear of them, but in fact they add up to so many times greater than the evil things which we do hear about. God's good world mustn't be measured by the news coverage of murders and misery, divorces and deceit, oppression and perversion. The world's joy does outweigh its pain, but we never seem to think of it that way. That's because really we do think that being good and happy is usual and being bad or sad is unusual. And that's because — whether we know it or not, and whether we celebrate it or not — in our heart of hearts we all really believe in a basic *goodness* of things, which is from God.

So, it's right and normal and human to rejoice, even though there might be pain and loss in our life. The joy outweighs the sorrow; the devil is only a creature turned bad, not an omnipotent divinity like God. God's got it under control: His plan works out for good, He has not slipped up and been caught out by the existence of evil!

His plan can cope with the mess we make. The Church tells us to *rejoice* today. It doesn't say: don't rejoice at Jesus's birth at Christmas because you can foresee His crucifixion on Good Friday!

St John the Baptist is our companion, our preacher, again this week, for a 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday running, and he points us, just as he did the people of his own day, to that 'great beyond' signalled by the coming of Jesus. With great fervour, and with the conviction of God's Spirit at work in him, John stirs up the people to be ready for this great new event, the appearing of the long-hoped-for Messiah. Nothing can contain inside him that Good News — he is bursting with it, full of joy, as he prepares to welcome Jesus to the Jordan and point Him out to the people. Now, John didn't exist in a tidy, insulated vacuum. Not at all; he had many hardships to endure: a harsh lifestyle out in the wilderness; severe opposition from priests and levites; and mortal danger from King Herod. Yet, even so, he stands there, and aware that Jesus is coming, his heart is consumed with the joy of the occasion.

A few summers ago I met a man in Lourdes called Leslie. He had multiple disabilities: a list of things wrong with him, many from birth, and he's had over 30 operations but he kept on saying to me, over and over again: "I have a good life."<sup>1</sup> Leslie is a man able to enjoy a life which isn't comfortable, and isn't easy, and has had more than its fair share of difficulties, but he could say "I have a great life". He was still full of the joy of living, with and for others; with and for God. Like Leslie, John the Baptist gained his joy even from a hard life: he had a difficult message to preach, and people misunderstood him, and eventually he was even martyred. Nor was John the Baptist's 'career' ever going to fulfil him: his mission was going to peter out as Jesus took over from his ministry. John didn't revel in a short-lived fame that was not his own: he just kept pointing away from himself and saying, 'No, Christ is the One you want to follow. Forget about me.'

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<sup>1</sup> I wondered why he reiterated this, and came to realise that society's promotion of abortion probably makes him feel threatened: the systematic elimination of the disabled before birth is like saying to him 'Of course you shouldn't really have been born'!

So, that's how to overcome life's disappointments. Look at Jesus who is coming, and say — *there's* the point of my life. Now I can face pain and sorrow and difficulties and illness and incapacity and career failures and bereavement, because I know they aren't going to last. What's going to last is the joy of living, because God the baby is going to be born in a stable at Bethlehem; God living our life and giving us His life. What more joy could we have than God the Son sharing life with us? Take this middle Advent Sunday to rejoice for all you're worth — because what you're worth is what God says you're worth. He says you're worth living for, and you're worth dying for — and He knows exactly what He's doing.

Let's take away inot this Christmas vacation the joy being offered to us this *Gaudete* Sunday; let's carry this joy through the next week or so, and make sure that we bring much deliberate Christian joy to others in the run-up to Christmas. Let's be sure to carry Newman-House, Catholic-Chaplaincy, joy to our families and others if we're travelling home for Christmas: wouldn't it be nice if

they saw that you come home with a different spirit, a Christ-filled joy born of practising your faith fervently, a new and deeper love for Jesus? Let's imitate John the Baptist in this our time and place: yes, as ever, a time of uncertainty and hardship, but a time that we can still turn into one of joy for those around us: because we see, as John clearly saw, that "the Lord is near": Jesus is here, ... the Son of God, the Light, the bridegroom, the Messiah, "God with us", ... the One who brings us divine joy from heaven.

*"Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come to Thee, O Israel."*