

3rd Sunday of Advent (C)

15th December 2024

‘Teacher, what shall we do?’

Zeph 3: *shout for joy, daughter of Zion!*

Is 12: *sing and shout for joy for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel!*

Phil 4: *Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice!*

Lk 3: 10–18: *A feeling of expectancy had grown among the people ...*

The liturgy of this 3rd Sunday of Advent — from the pink 3rd candle of the Advent wreath and the rose-pink vestments, to the liberal peppering of the Mass texts with the words “joy” and “rejoice” — makes it quite clear that there’s something a bit different about this particular day of Advent, compared to all the other days in the 4-wk season. *Gaudete* Sunday, as it’s called, takes its name from the opening word of the *Introit* (the Entrance antiphon): *Gaudete in Domino semper; iterum, dico, Gaudete! Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I say, Rejoice!* These are the opening words of our 2nd Reading today, from St Paul to the Philippians, ch. 4. The setting of this middle Sunday of Advent is the *joy* that we are preparing for, the joy of Christ’s birth, that brings joy to the whole world. Not only St Paul, but the prophet of this week, Zephaniah, and indeed the Gospel passage, the next piece of Lk ch. 3, all bring joy to this *Gaudete* celebration. Christmas is

coming!! The great festival is now appearing on the horizon, so we can permit ourselves more than a hint of the joy that *Christmas faith* (a ‘faith-filled Christmas,’ as opposed to a merely secular food-&-gifts event) will bring.

Now, as well as the great ‘prophet for Advent,’ Isaiah, whom we were thinking about 2 wks ago (the key announcer of the Messianic tradition in Judaism), we also have the great ‘saint of Advent,’ whom we heard of last Sunday and again today, St John the Baptist. Isaiah’s own prophecy — “*the voice crying in the wilderness, prepare a way for the Lord*” — pointed towards that forerunner of the Messiah: St John the Baptist closes the OT as the last prophet, and opens the NT as the first Christian saint and indeed martyr. John is the saint whose powerful preaching at the River Jordan’s banks specifically prepared the way for Jesus to come; so his ministry speaks to us powerfully of Advent *preparation*. And only after that preparation do we move on to Christmas itself to celebrate the arrival of the Christ child, compared to whom John says he is so much the less as to be unworthy to untie the sandal straps!

St John the Baptist reminds us that *mercy* — God’s *tender* forgiveness — remains a most crucial part of our Catholic faith, and one that we cannot neglect. Each year in my former parish Bishop John Arnold when he was in this diocese used to come to speak to the parents of my First-Holy-Communion children, and he would always say that one of the problems is that whilst we might be urged in Advent and Lent in a general way to make use of the Sacrament of Confession, we are not often helped as adults to prepare properly for this Sacrament. We may remember the preparation we were given as *children*; and never have moved forward to relate to the Sacrament as adults!

There are, I suppose, 2 opposing problems as to why people find it hard to go to Confession: some consider that in fact they have *nothing meaningful* to confess, the ‘I haven’t really sinned at all’ approach; whilst others instead think that they have *too much, or things too bad*, to confess! Each, for opposite reasons, can feel wrongly discouraged from going to Confession. So let’s make a few practical considerations to help move us forward:

1. **Not one of us is perfect.** Every one of us, even the most

seemingly devout, is in need of Confession; in fact the closer we grow to God the more aware we are of offending Him. It’s not enough to say, “Well, I’ve not actually *killed* anyone; I don’t need Confession.” There are always things, events, attitudes, in our lives that could do with being forgiven; and anyway, it’s the grace of *regular* Confession that helps us overcome bad habits: gradually, month by month, year by year, God can overcome in us the sins that we regularly suffer from. None of this can happen if we simply ignore our need of being forgiven. It’s as if each day we didn’t wash because we couldn’t see the *dirt*; sooner or later our choice to ignore the dirt would become a big problem, and it would be pretty obvious to everyone! We all need Confession! It is *such a gift to us* from the most merciful Jesus to have the chance to be cleansed, rather than not!

2. Then, on the other hand, there can be the **fear, or challenge, of confessing one’s sins**. Maybe one feels they are too big or too lengthy to bring to the priest. Wouldn’t he be scandalized; wouldn’t he be outraged? *No — he would not be*: in 25yrs as a priest I will have heard pretty much anything you would ever need to tell me, before. And anyway, the priest is far more upset by having no-one

coming to Confession than by someone humbly and sincerely acknowledging their sins before God. It is a privileged situation to be in, as a Confessor; a humbling one, receiving in the Sacrament those who are being open enough before God to want to be forgiven. It is a joyful and sacred thing, to minister God's mercy as a priest.

3. **Maybe it is hard to get up the courage to go in!** Sometimes it's just hard to set foot in the Confessional at all. Well, it's not so awful and not so strange ... Here at regular times we use the sacristy for Confessions, and it's soundproofed! There's the chance to kneel anonymously, unseen by the priest — that's what I usually opt for when I'm hearing Confessions here — but I'm also happy at other times to offer the chance for Confession face to face in my office if that's your preference. And if you feel like you don't know the ritual or where to begin, simply ask the priest at the time to prompt you and help you. It's the *least formal* of all the sacraments, I'd say.
4. Most significantly, we ought to look at the **things we might need to confess**. The Church is not trying to judge us when she places lists for the *examination of conscience* before us; nor is she trying to scare us! She is simply trying to jog our

memories; and open us up (as a plough churns up the soil for it to be fertile): open us up to the enriching grace of the Spirit. We should certainly *only confess real things that are sins*, not generalities. It's better to be specific, to say what actually happened, instead of using vague categories:

- a. So, rather than saying, 'I am not charitable enough,' say: 'I was extremely rude and curt to my mother the other day when she called on the phone, and I do that rather too often.'
 - b. Instead of saying 'I tend to be selfish and ignore people,' maybe say, 'I know I deliberately avoided a homeless man's gaze the other day, when at least I could have smiled and said hello.'
 - c. Instead of saying, 'I am not praying enough,' one might say, 'I've set myself this particular time to pray each day, but I need the grace to stop missing that time for prayer at any old excuse.'
5. Now, another thing. We all know that there are lots of **insidious temptations out there** now, especially on the internet; and we should be really cautious of our weakness in that regard. I am always recommending in Confession that one install an internet filter to ensure 'safe searching' and to

provide a *buffer* to the immoral images that are all too easily available on the internet. My suggestion also is that when one sets the password for such internet filters, a holy word, or holy phrase, is used ... something that by its sacred character really helps prevent your bypassing it! And, as I've said before, if you're living in a situation where you can do this, leave your phone in another place when you go to bed; don't take it to your bedroom: I've been following this practice for years, now, and it really helps.

6. **With regard to missing Mass:** well, we should remember that our weekly devotion to *Sunday Mass is the best expression there is* of our faithfulness to Jesus Christ: to be with Him, near Him, adoring Him. For us who are perfectly well and fit enough to attend Mass, it's imperative that we attend Sunday Mass every week. But it's worth bearing in mind that there *are* reasons — illness, for example, or caring for a frail or sick relative, or long-distance travel, or having to work shifts in essential services — that may sometimes mean that missing Sunday Mass cannot be helped; whereas taking a holiday, or just 'being too busy' is no real excuse.

Let's be honest and open, therefore, as we listen today with faith to John the Baptist. He gave real spiritual

encouragement and sound practical advice to those preparing for the Messiah, didn't he? Let's do the same as we prepare for the Messiah's birth: let's heed John's call, and act positively in response to him as did those tax-collectors, soldiers, and others at the River Jordan, seeking real forgiveness and a chance to live far better and more closely in God's way. It may be that you will seek the Sacrament of Reconciliation at some point once you are at home for the vacation — but if you would prefer to act now, and to take the opportunity for your Advent Confession here, before you go, then the times now possible are: today 12.15–1pm, and again 6–7pm: these would be the ideal times for you to come and avail yourself of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, but otherwise just ask me / e-mail me for a Confession time at another point — *I endeavour to be as available as possible*. So, let's make a humble and holy *and joyous* Advent, accepting the invitation of St John the Baptist by welcoming the Lord Jesus's sacramental forgiveness of our sins and allowing us therefore to really experience the *Gaudete!* of this Advent!