

## JOY IN ADVENT

Isaiah 61. 1-4, 8-11

1 Thessalonians 5. 16-24

John 1. 6-8, 19-28

I speak to you in the name of the † Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

*Gaudete in Domino semper: iterum dico, gaudete.* ‘Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, rejoice!’ These are the Latin words from the Introit that we heard the Choir sing earlier, and they give the Third Sunday of Advent its name: Gaudete Sunday, or ‘Joyful Sunday’. Since at least 750 AD (and possibly well before that date) Benedictine monks have begun Mass on the third Sunday of Advent by chanting this marvellous command from the fourth chapter of St. Paul’s letter to the Philippians<sup>1</sup> (and repeated conveniently in our appointed epistle reading from 1 Thessalonians). On ‘Joyful Sunday’, Christians around the world light the pink Advent candle and preparations for the great Feast of our Lord’s Incarnation take on a more festive tone. Today, God says to us, ‘rejoice!’, and we say to one another, ‘and again I say, rejoice!’

The monks in the early Middle Ages who first gave us ‘Joyful Sunday’ understood something that is important: Advent is about paradox. In only eight days’ time, we will celebrate the piercing of the veil between heaven and earth, when the sovereign Lord of the cosmos became one of his own creatures, and united himself with us in joy and suffering by his own human flesh. We shall hear the familiar story of the Incarnation once again, a story that never grows old with retelling. God’s mighty arms, accustomed to swirling galaxies, will be bound in swaddling clothes. God the Son, serenaded from the dawn of creation by choirs of angels, will doze to his mother’s lullaby. We will celebrate the fact that new Life entered our world, so that

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Ph 4. 4.

Death may finally be defeated. How can we not be joyful at such a thought? How wonderful it is for us to be able to contemplate such beauty and such awesome grace. The pink candle of the Third Sunday of Advent reminds us that the celebration of the Incarnation of the Word made flesh will come very soon.

But the joy of 'Joyful Sunday' is much greater than simply knowing that we are only one week away from Midnight Mass. Advent is about far more than that! The Scriptures promise, and our appointed gospel reading proclaims that 'the true light which enlightens everyone' came into the world; and it will come again. Our Lord will once more make his home among mortals. Every knee in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth will bow to him; and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. The glory of God will light up the world and the nations will walk by its light. And the God-who-is-with-us will wipe every tear from our eyes. The entire universe will gaze in adoration upon Christ's radiant scars and know that nothing will ever triumph over the boundless love of God. We will know perfect joy and perfect peace. This will indeed happen, my dear friends; and it may happen soon. Today's pink candle reminds us of that as well.

Unfortunately, the fallen world in which you and I live scoffs at such thoughts. The same voices that shouted down the prophets of ancient Israel and taunted our Lord on the cross still call out today: 'realistic' voices, cynical voices, voices of despair and emptiness. 'You don't really believe all that rubbish, do you?' they ask us. 'If your Lord really is coming back, why is he taking so long?' If only these people could comprehend just a fraction of the eternal glory that lay in that manger at Bethlehem; if only they could see the love of God pouring out of our Saviour's wounds on Calvary; if only they could realise that the power of sin and death has been crushed for ever by the stone rolled away on Easter morning; then their doubts would be quieted, and their hearts would be opened. You and I have an opportunity, and that is to remind them (in ways that they can hear and understand) that God is faithful,

and that his promises are true. But even more importantly, you and I are called to show people the Love of God that was made manifest two millennia ago in the Babe of Bethlehem.

Advent is not simply about preparing ourselves for the glories of Christmas (or the ‘Christ Mass’). It is also about preparing ourselves to be living, breathing icons of the Divine Love that shows forth from the Nativity, the Crucifixion, and the Resurrection. Jesus, the perfect icon of God’s love, must increase within us, if we are to ‘bring the Lord near’ an age that so desperately needs him. Our rejoicing – to quote St Paul, our ability to ‘give thanks in all circumstances’ – is a potentially powerful testimony to all people and a means of showing forth Christ in our fallen world.

Yes, I know what you must be thinking. Giving thanks in all circumstances is indeed a challenge. ‘Rejoicing always’ can seem well-nigh impossible at times. We all know that. But the fact is, you and I and the rest of the people of God have reason to give thanks, no matter what happens. Why? Because we know the difference between happiness and joy.

Happiness is managing our circumstances in such a way that we get what we want. Fill in the blank: I will be happy when\_\_\_\_ I get a new job; I get a new boyfriend or girlfriend; my husband or wife changes; my mother is happy; the pain goes away; I retire; I buy a house; I sell my house; I lose weight. And then we get these things; we find that we’re still not happy, and we look for something else to do, change or obtain. The world has programmed us to believe that happiness is the absence of pain or discomfort.

The fact is, however, that our souls know that there is something deeper and longer-lasting than happiness. Our souls know that *joy* is not contingent on anything else to

exist. Joy cannot be bought; and it is not conditioned on someone else's behaviour or actions. *Joy exists in our souls because God placed it there; and there is a joy inside of us that responds to him alone.* As our text in Isaiah promises, all of us will be able to say before our God, 'I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God'. This joy, which is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit, is not just a joy that is given to us in the future; it is given to us now.

So the pink candle burns this 'Joyful Sunday', stoking our desire for that night when we will gather here to celebrate the first coming of Christ's light into the world so long ago at Bethlehem. The 'joyful' candle also reflects our longing for that glorious day when all darkness will finally be put to flight, when 'the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven' (1 Th 4. 16).

But the candle's small, steady flame also reminds us that Advent is not simply about the distant past and the indeterminate future. We worship the Holy One 'who was, and is, and is to come' (Rev 1. 8). Between the wonders of the Incarnation and the Second Coming, our God has not stopped coming to his people. We have not been left as orphans. God the Holy Spirit, the sacred fire at the heart of Christ's Church, abides with us, giving us life and growth, indwelling us at our baptism, sanctifying us in our walk through this world, and empowering us for service in the kingdom. It is to this same Spirit that St Paul refers when we writes in our epistle text, 'Do not quench the Spirit'.

And in a few moments God our Saviour will make himself present for us in the most tangible of ways, as Jesus's sacrifice at Calvary is re-presented here on this holy altar and our Lord shares his precious Body and Blood with those he has redeemed. He comes now; he comes to us today, to offer his very own life to us. That is most certainly an Advent-event worth celebrating.

And so, my brothers and sisters, ‘rejoice; and again I say, rejoice!’ ‘May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.’

Amen.