

Third Sunday of Advent, Year B

Isaiah 61:1-2, 10-11

Luke 1:46-50, 53-54

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

John 1:6-8, 19-28

The spirit of the liturgy all throughout Advent is one of expectation and preparation for the feast of Christmas, as well as for the second coming of Christ. Similar to Lent, this spiritual preparation is encouraged with acts of purification and penance, such as in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, or in sacrificial acts of kindness or generosity to others.

But as we approach the final stages of Advent, the Church gives us a chance to pause from the penitential character of this season with today's celebration of "Gaudete Sunday", which is Latin for "rejoice". It's taken from the opening words of the Entrance Antiphon for today's Mass:

"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice. Indeed, the Lord is near."

It's a chance to reflect on the joy and gladness of the promised redemption won by Christ, and thus the violet vestments of Advent are combined with the joyous white vestments of Christmas to create the rose-coloured vestments I am wearing today. Furthermore, our readings on this third Sunday of Advent emphasise the joyous anticipation of the Lord's coming.

In today's Gospel, we see John the Baptist being questioned by representatives from the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem. They have come to ask him directly who he is. As we heard last week, John lived in the desert, preaching repentance and baptising those who were sorry for their sins and wanted to reconcile with God. Clearly, many had begun to wonder just what this man was about, and so they ask him, "Who are you? What do you have to say for yourself?"

Many who were drawn out into the desert to see him no doubt thought that—after a few false pretenders—he was finally the long-awaited Messiah. However, John wastes no time in telling them that such a notion is mistaken – he's not the one they've been waiting for. Perhaps if we were crafting the Gospel story, this case of mistaken identity might have lingered a bit longer, to play up the suspense. But our Gospel writer—Saint John the Evangelist—is more interested in the story's spiritual value rather than mere literary value. John the Baptist, he makes clear, is under no illusions about who he is. He has been sent by God not to direct attention to himself, but to prepare the way for someone far greater.

And so on this Third Sunday of Advent, we are invited to recall just who that is – the one whom the Baptist prepared for – the one whom we also await. Our expectation for him is so great that the liturgy prompts us to begin—even now—to rejoice, to

anticipate his coming with gladness and gratitude. The presence of John the Baptist is a sign that the Lord's salvation is at hand. He is the Herald that announces the coming of the King, the King not yet here but coming very soon.

John the Baptist kept his eyes focused on the one who *really* matters, and we are called to do the same. John realised that he was part of a story that was far bigger than himself, and this enabled him to play his part well. You and I are also part of a bigger story, but, like some of John's contemporaries, we can also be tempted to get bogged down in the details. While we should be rejoicing at the coming of our King, we can often become so weighed down by the ups and downs of our own lives that we forget the overall plot. We can mistake our own story—with all its joys and sorrows—as the primary narrative of our reality, when in truth, we are but part of a much bigger story.

We all have the tendency at times—perhaps especially at this time of year—to focus exclusively on what we are doing, on what is happening to us – and in so doing so, we can be oblivious to the ways in which God is at work around us. We can become so wrapped up in what *we* are about, that we can miss entirely what God might be wanting to reveal to us. The key to true happiness is understanding that we exist not as the primary actor of our own stories, but as characters caught up in the wonderful tale of God's love for the world, and that God is at the centre of it. John the Baptist understood this – he played the part he had to play, and he played it well, but he didn't mistake his role for something greater than what it was.

In the light of all this, let me share a bit of spiritual advice I once picked up from a wise older priest – he said, live your life as if God is the main character in the story, rather than yourself. *Live your life as if God is the main character in the story, rather than yourself.* It may sound counterintuitive—that we are not the central characters of our own lives—but believe it or not, we're actually far happier if we can live our life this way. If we think to ourselves, “What is the Lord doing today? Where is the Lord moving? How is the Lord speaking and acting?”, we will find that without the pressure of being at the centre of everything, we have more space to move and breathe and look around us, and see what God is up to.

Consider again St John the Baptist. In spite of being sent by God and being described by Jesus as the greatest man born of a woman, he knows his place in the larger story. He acknowledges his lowliness next to Jesus—“I am not worthy to untie his sandal”—and he is able to step aside for him: “He must increase, and I must decrease.”

Of course, all of this is easier said than done. You might be thinking, “Father, if only you knew what I'm facing right now, how much my friend or relative is hurting, how lonely and anxious I feel – how could I possibly rejoice?” It's true, the invitation to rejoice doesn't make all of our problems go away. But when we are struggling, it's all the more important to be grounded in those truths that really matter. Like a loving Mother, the Church consoles us by declaring that if we only knew how much our struggles—great though they may seem—pale in comparison to the love that God has for us, and the peace that Jesus can bring, we could not help but rejoice. St Faustina

Kowalska, who herself knew much suffering, once said, “If the suffering soul only knew how much it is loved by God, it would die of joy and excess of happiness!”

The details of each of our lives are vastly different, but they all share one thing in common. At their heart, our lives have all been defined by a story that is classic and timeless and *true* – a Saviour has been born for us, our King has come, and each day he wishes to draw us ever more into a peace that the world cannot give, and the world cannot take away. Don’t allow your present concerns—great as they may be—to overshadow your true identity – namely, that you are a child of God, beloved by him, and redeemed in Christ. No matter what trials you may face or what darkness you may encounter, the love of God for you in Christ cannot be taken away.

The Incarnation of Christ is the most mind-blowing answer from God to the problem of human sin and suffering, and so a half-hearted response on our part will not suffice. Yes, trials will still remain – our passing world—and those too attached to it within the Church—will be nervous about people who take Christ seriously. But such opposition pales in comparison with the glory and promise and challenge of the risen Christ.

The Advent of Christ is part of this glorious story of salvation and redemption. As followers of Christ, this is also *our* story. It’s *your* story. So embrace it, because amidst all the darkness and confusion of our world, this story truly is *Good News*.