

Third Sunday of Advent (C)

Zephaniah 3:14-18

Isaiah 12:2-6

Philippians 4:4-7

Luke 3:10-18

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 the confession of sins we will be celebrating as a parish this coming Thursday.

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.

Note the sense of expectation that is building in the Gospel. Crowds of Jews have gathered around John the Baptist in the desert. They await God's return to Israel, and want to be part of his coming kingdom. The people expect that God will give them a king to overthrow their oppressors and establish God's reign of peace, justice, and prosperity once and for all.

John has to counter the assumption that all Jews would be part of God's coming kingdom simply because they are Jews. Instead, he demands that each person must pass through the waters of baptism—just like their ancestors passed through the Red Sea—to inherit the coming kingdom. And this is no mere symbolic act. John is emphasising that friendship with God requires wholehearted obedience to and unwavering trust in him.

When John asks the crowds to show evidence of their repentance, they are right to ask what they should do. If God's rule is to come, surely the people will have some part to play in bringing it about. If his kingdom is to be one of peace and justice, surely they will have to set the world straight in no small measure.

But John doesn't set the people some major task. He doesn't tell them to overthrow the Romans or to take down the system. Rather, the fruits of repentance are to be

found in personal transformation. Each person, entrusting their life and livelihood to God, prepares for the coming of Christ in their daily encounters with others.

This task is a real challenge even for us. We all like to dream about world peace, for instance, but such an abstract concept requires no real commitment on our part. John is talking about a real conversion of heart, so that in our day-to-day lives we might be capable of the kind of true charity and selflessness that are a necessary condition of genuine peace.

To prepare for the coming of Christ, John the Baptist exhorts us to live justly. And Jesus, building on this firm foundation, invites us to live the way of love.

John freely declared that Jesus is mightier than he. John's baptism prepared the people for forgiveness by repentance of their offenses against God. And then, baptising with the Holy Spirit, Jesus overcomes our transgressions and restores us to God's friendship. Those who pass through the waters of Jesus' baptism, those who die to sin and rise with Jesus to live for God, are made sharers in God's own life of love. The intimacy Jesus has with his heavenly Father is available to us here and now.

As sharers in God's life, we are called to hold fast to this incredible revelation of God's goodness that we have received in faith, and to be witnesses of it to our friends, our families, and to a world that is often overcome in darkness. Gaudete Sunday prepares us for the revelation that God does not remain silent or distant in the face of our darkness. No, he comes to be with us, to reveal himself to us, and to win our salvation.

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My friends, the details of our lives are all vastly different, but they 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 so a half-hearted response on our part will not suffice. To be sure, trials will still remain – our bourgeois culture—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. Embrace it, because amidst

all the darkness and confusion of our world, this story is most definitively Good News.