

Third Sunday of Advent, Year 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 celebrated as a parish this past 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.

--

Such intimacy with the Lord and the graces it offers are available to us at all times. But there are particular seasons of grace that the Church places before us, in which we are encouraged to return to the Lord with a particular focus. There are moments throughout the day in which we are invited to stop and pray. There is the Sunday rest that marks our week. There are seasons of preparation and celebration through the year, such as our present season of Advent. Then there are special years dedicated to particular prayer and renewal, known within the Church as a *Jubilee Year*. As you may know, a Jubilee Year will be celebrated in 2025, starting on Christmas Eve this year.

The concept of a Jubilee Year stems from the book of Leviticus in the Old Testament. Just as the Sabbath was (and is) to be a day of physical and spiritual rest and renewal within the week, so too the sabbath year (i.e. the seventh year) was assigned as a time of deliberate slowing down. In Hebrew it was known as the "shmita", which literally means "release", and it is still practiced by some Jews to this day. It is from this concept that we get our word *sabbatical*.

During this seventh year, the land was left to lie fallow, and all agricultural activity, including ploughing, planting, pruning and harvesting, was to cease. Various fruits and herbs which grew of their own accord were to be considered communal property, and—significantly—all debts to one's fellow Jews were to be forgiven. Such observances were seen as a test of one's religious faith, and the book of Leviticus promised bountiful harvests to those who kept them.

There are great spiritual benefits from this kind of slowing down and trusting that the Lord will provide. In our day we can also affirm the significant agricultural value of allowing the land to lie fallow every few years. Indeed, we can see the great harm done to soil, for instance, if a piece of land is farmed on an industrial scale indefinitely.

Such sabbath year observances were then taken to another level in the Jubilee year. After a “week” of Sabbath years—in other words, 49 years—a Jubilee year would be celebrated on the fiftieth year. The English term “Jubilee” originates from the Hebrew word for “ram’s horn”, which would be sounded throughout the land to inaugurate the beginning of the Jubilee year. Leviticus speaks of it as “a trumpet-blast of liberty”.

In addition to the agricultural observances, which would be kept for a second consecutive year, there were significant economic implications of the Jubilee Year. Again, debts were to be forgiven, but now slaves and prisoners were also to be liberated, and property was to be returned to its original owners (or their heirs).

Scholars debate just how fully the Jubilee year was actually lived out—no doubt some of the wealthier members of society tried to skirt their way around such economic requirements—but we can see at least in theory the impetus for a great spiritual and material renewal, with a particular concern for the poor and destitute. The rich couldn’t get richer indefinitely – all peoples would need to acknowledge their dependence upon the Lord, both spiritually and materially.

This concept of the Jubilee Year was revived within the Church in the Middle Ages, and it lives on to this day. Initially, a Jubilee year was proclaimed every fifty years, and eventually it became every twenty-five years. Occasional extraordinary Jubilee years are also celebrated, such as the Jubilee Year of Mercy we had in 2016.

In Catholic tradition, such Holy Years are a particular time for forgiveness of sins, and also for forgiving the punishment due to sin (known as indulgences). They are a time of reconciliation between adversaries, of conversion, of pilgrimage, of solidarity with the poor, and of thanksgiving to God.

The 2025 Jubilee Year will start on Christmas Eve and will last until the 6th of January, 2026. The motto for the Holy Year is “Pilgrims of Hope.” The year will commence with the opening of the Holy Doors in Rome, which pilgrims can walk through to receive a plenary indulgence. Indeed, the city of Rome is expected to receive many pilgrims from all over the world throughout the Holy Year.

Various local churches and shrines have also been assigned as places of pilgrimage for those who can’t make it to Rome. Here in Perth, one of the holy sites of pilgrimage is the Schoenstatt Shrine here in our own parish. I strongly encourage you to make a prayerful pilgrimage to the Shrine at some point during the Jubilee year.

Allow this Holy Year to be a time of spiritual renewal. Take advantage of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Allow space in your life to slow down, and pay attention to what the Lord is doing in your life. Examine the material circumstances of your life. Are there material attachments that you need freedom from, or attachments to things like holding grudges, or other spiritual vices?

Take advantage of the plenary indulgence offered during this Holy Year. I spoke of the material liberation that formed part of the Jewish Jubilee Year. Well, an indulgence is similarly a form of liberation, but now on a cosmic scale.

The concept of indulgences is a bit controversial among some Christians, so a way of thinking about them might be as follows: God not only wants to forgive our sins, but he also wants to heal and transform us. If we imagine our sins as nails driven into a piece of wood, and forgiveness as the removal of those nails, we would still be left with holes in the wood where the nails once were. In other words, the work of God is not complete upon mere forgiveness, but seeks to go further through healing and transforming the effects of our sins, which is accomplished by his supernatural grace.

So in the Sacrament of Reconciliation Christ offers us the forgiveness of our sins, and through indulgences he helps heal the spiritual effects of our sins. An indulgence may be applied to oneself, or—as an act of great mercy to our deceased loved ones—it can be applied to a soul in Purgatory.

To obtain the Jubilee indulgence offered in this Holy Year, we are asked to make a pilgrimage to a designated place of prayer—such as the Schoenstatt Shrine—to make a Sacramental confession, to receive Holy Communion, to pray for the pope's intentions, and to strive for freedom from all attachment to sin. And you can do this as often as you like throughout the year (though only once a day).

Pope Francis has prayed that this Jubilee year may be for everyone “a moment of genuine, personal encounter with the Lord Jesus, the ‘door’ of our salvation, whom the Church is charged to proclaim always, everywhere and to all as ‘our hope’.”

As followers of Christ, we are called to hold fast to the incredible revelation of God's goodness that we have received in faith, and to be witnesses of it in our world that is so often shrouded 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. May we strive to nourish our faith in this tremendous mystery in a particular way this coming Jubilee Year, and witness to the Good News of this divine encounter with all those we meet.