

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Gospel: John 1:6-8, 19-28

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the desert, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said. Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

REFLECTION 1: JOY, HAPPINESS AND HOPE

If you ever travelled to the Holy Land, I am sure that a visit to the Dead Sea would have been on the itinerary. Just north of the Dead Sea lies the location chosen by John the Baptist, to announce the coming of the Messiah. John the Evangelist in our Gospel for today (Jn. 1:6-8) states that the Baptist John, is not the Messiah, he is only a 'witness' to give testimony, a testimony that ultimately will bring others to have faith in Jesus. The Jewish religious establishment who are opposed to Jesus question John, 'Who are you then?' John answers that he is not the Messiah (Christ) nor is he Elijah or a Moses-like prophet, he is the voice that announces the Christ and gives witness to him. John states that he is of secondary importance and that Jesus, the one he vouches for, is centre stage. In fact he is not even worthy to stoop and serve him.

John the Baptist did a fine job all on his own and his message to us is one of great joy. That is why the 3rd Sunday of Advent is traditionally referred to as Gaudete Sunday, the Sunday of Joy – of glad news. Notice how the colour of the liturgy for today is rose, the symbol of joy.

Each of the sacred texts for this Sunday calls for our joy. Unlike happiness which is a temporary response to circumstances in our lives, joy is a keen awareness of the presence of God. This joy wells up from the depths of our being to assure us that even in the midst of loss, pain, struggle or fear, God is near. Joy is a learned response, requiring time, patience and considerable struggle. Joy is elusive, it cannot be summoned like an actor's tears or laughter. It is a response that grows deeper and stronger each time it is tested. Paul's correspondence with the Thessalonians today is full of joy, '...be happy at all times' (Thess. 5).

As we celebrate the God of our joy who comes into our lives, the readings today may seem to be out of touch with a world so darkened by violence, terrorism, poverty, famine and natural calamities of every kind. Our hearts may be cynical, jaded and devoid of a sense of eager expectancy. It may seem heartless and unsympathetic to give ourselves over to joyful celebration when so many have no reason to smile, let alone rejoice. Maybe some of us are searching for that 'sugar-coated pill' that we could ingest during this celebratory time to make us feel better and the world more rosy! But the church has a different cure for this condition. We call it hope. We hope and rejoice and deal courageously with the present, because we know that the future does not consist of more of the same, but is in a permanent

communion with, 'One whom we have heard, whom we have seen with our eyes and touched with our hands...the Word of Life, Jesus!' (1 John 1:1).

REFLECTION 2:

THE GOSPEL OF JOY

Mark Twain once remarked that 'most people are bothered by the passages in Scripture which they can't understand; but I have noticed that the passages in Scripture that trouble me most are those I do understand!' The readings for the 3rd Sunday in Advent however should afford us great joy. For instance Isaiah writes about healers that sooth every pain, all those fettered are set free and the *anawin* or 'poor ones' whose only riches and security are found in God, are to be clothed with justice and dignity. One will come amongst us – One in whom hope and healing freedom and salvation will find their most eloquent expression (John) - He is the One whom we await with joy (1 Tess). So today, Isaiah, Paul and the two Johns (the evangelist and the Baptist) call the people of God (that's us) to cultivate that joy and allow it to sustain us. Ours is truly good news and that is why today is referred to as Gaudete Sunday, the Sunday of Joy.

Pope Francis knows all the evils that plague our planet. Nevertheless he encourages believers to live and to preach the joy of the Gospel. 'The great danger in today's world, pervaded as it is by consumerism, is the desolation and anguish born of a complacent and covetous heart', writes Pope Francis in his first encyclical, 'The Joy of the Gospel'. Those who follow Jesus need, he says, to evangelize, with a fierce and unrelenting joy. As Francis humorously remarks, 'an evangelist must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral!'. Isaiah's 'Year of Favours' invites believers to bring the blessings of God's bounty to bear on all who still suffer physical, economic and spiritual need. Paul, in his letter to the Thessalonians, reminds all of us to sustain and support the joy of the Gospel with prayer and welcome Jesus as the One sent by God to be the light of the world, a world distorted by sin.

Pope Francis has set forth a series of decisions that are ours to accept or ignore. We are to say no to an economy of exclusion, 'to sustain a lifestyle which excludes others and renders us deaf to the cry of the poor'. Pope Francis also urges us to say no to the new idolatry of money and that inequality that spawns violence. Let us not, he says, embrace a 'tomb psychology that develops and slowly transforms Christians into mummies in a museum'. Rather let us say 'Yes' to God, yes to Jesus Christ, yes to the Spirit and to all new relationships founded on Christ.

Today's Gospel asks us if we know who we are? How do we answer? It is not who you are but 'whose you are' that Jesus provides a clue to our true identity. We can hopefully respond with John the Baptist by saying 'we belong to God and our Lord Jesus Christ whose sandals straps we are not worthy to untie'.