

### Third Sunday of Advent

Luke begins the public ministry of Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth. The locals had heard of Jesus' reputation in Capernaum and he was invited to be the preacher for the occasion. He was handed the scroll of Isaiah. He unrolled it and found the words which we have just heard in the First Reading: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour'(Luke 4:18-19). The good news brought by Jesus is of God's love reaching out to the poor, to those closed in with nowhere to go, to the blind who cannot see their way and to the oppressed who are weighed down under the burdens of life and who have lost hope. To all who feel this way, Jesus is a source of joy, and it is the feeling that pervades all today's readings. The Entrance Antiphon of today's Mass is taken from Paul's letter to the Philippians: 'Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say rejoice! The Lord is near'(Philippians 4:4-5). The opening word 'Rejoice' is 'Gaudete' in Latin – and so today has traditionally been called 'Gaudete Sunday'. This is also why we have a rose coloured candle and hanging. Our joy flows from the realisation that Christmas is very near. God is coming with special graces for all who cry out to God in their distress.

Normally the Response is taken from the Psalms, but today we have the canticle of Mary, the Magnificat – a cry of joy from a young woman who has been loved by God. God has covered her with his glory, taken her into his embrace and breathed his Spirit into her, and the fruit of their love is the Messiah, conceived in her womb.

In the Second Reading Paul, too, calls on the Christian community in Thessalonika to 'be happy at all times', living constantly in the presence of God and thanking God for the many blessings they have received through God's love. God has poured the Spirit of his love into our hearts (see Romans 5:5). This is the source of our joy, so long as we are in tune with God dwelling in our hearts and listening to God's inspiration.

On the subject of joy, a contemporary Carmelite reminds us that spiritual joy is not an emotion but 'a choosing to place one's happiness where it belongs: in the fulfilment of life's deepest purposes – in pleasing the Father'(Ruth Burrows, *Ascent to Love* page 88). It is true. One can experience joy on a cross. It is a matter of focusing on love and filling every moment with whatever love God offers us to give – however we might be feeling. True joy is expressed beautifully in the following poem by the English poet and mystic, Caryl Houselander (Pastoral, from *The Reed of God*, page 39):

'I am your reed, sweet shepherd, glad to be.  
Now, if you will, breathe out your joy in me  
and make bright song.  
Or fill me with the soft moan of your love  
When your delight has failed to call or move  
The flock from wrong.

Make children's songs, or any songs to fill  
Your reed with breath of life; but at your will  
Lay down the flute,

And take repose, while music infinite  
Is silence in your heart; and laid on it  
Your reed is mute.'

Let us listen, too, to Julian of Norwich: 'It is God's will that we have true delight with him in our salvation, and in it he wants us to be greatly comforted and strengthened, and so joyfully he wishes our souls to be occupied with his grace. For we are his bliss, because he endlessly delights in us; and so with his grace shall we delight in him' (*Showings*, chapter 23).

Ultimately, the source of our joy is the realisation that we do not have to be strong on our own. We are surrounded by love. This is highlighted in today's Gospel. The focus is on John the Baptist, whose mission from God was to point people towards Jesus. The Baptist was not trying to shed light himself. Rather, he pointed to Jesus. He never forgot that Jesus is the light of the world, the one who shows us God's face. Later in the Gospel, Jesus will say of the Baptist: 'He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light' (John 5:35). His lamp shone so beautifully, because he reflected to others the light he himself received from Jesus.

The Jerusalem establishment sent priests and Levites to interrogate the Baptist because they were specialists in matters of cult. The Baptist emphatically asserts that he is not the promised and hoped for Christ; he is not the prophet Elijah; and he is not the prophet promised by Moses. The Baptist's mission is to prepare the way for one who is greater than Moses (see 1:18), and greater than the one who was God's instrument in leading the people back from exile. He is preparing the way for the Liberator God himself, 'the Lord' come to redeem the world.

The Baptist is 'baptising with water' on the far side of the Jordan, re-enacting the cleansing needed to enter the Promised Land. He is challenging the people to go down into the river and to experience physically what it was like to be overwhelmed ('baptised'), and then to rise from the water to begin a new life. In doing so he is reminding them that it was from the chaos of the swirling waters that God brought forth the splendour of the heavens and of the earth. He is also getting them to relive the journey of liberation through the waters of the Red Sea.

The Baptist recognises that his baptising is nothing more than a symbolic action. He is baptising with water and only with water. This baptism cannot bring about the new life that the people need. That must come from 'the one who is coming after me'. This one is standing among them, but they do not know him (compare 1:10). The Baptist does not feel worthy even to perform for him the menial tasks of a domestic slave.

It is not without significance that John's first image of Jesus is of one who is standing among us whom we do not know. John is challenging his community to reflect that they too, perhaps, are unaware of the presence of Jesus among them. The challenge of this opening scene is as urgent today as it ever was. Where is the Lord? How are we to prepare the way for his coming? Why do we not recognise him?

This opening scene offers us another challenge. Are we, perhaps, so caught up in what we are doing that we forget that it is Jesus who is the revelation of God and the one who gives life? Our greatest privilege, as the Beloved Disciple knew so well, is to share in Jesus' intimacy with God. If,

from that intimacy, we are graced to go out to others to attract them to Jesus that they too may share in his life, let us be grateful for the privilege. Let us not, however, be so caught up in the mission that we neglect the intimacy.

When Jesus selected the Twelve, it was firstly so that they would be with him. Only from there were they to go out as his missionaries (see Mark 3:14). The missionary does not take God's Word to others. We would not exist if the Word of God, through whom we were willed into being, was not already holding us in existence and drawing us to the Father. As missionaries we are called to look and to listen and to be so sensitively in touch with our lives that we can help others to recognise the one who is already in their lives but whom they 'do not know'(1:26). We will be able to help others do this only if we remember it ourselves, placing our trust in God's mercy and resting in his embrace. There is joy in this.