

Third Sunday of Advent, Year C

There is something quite special about the liturgy today. You will notice that the candle on the Advent wreath is a different colour: rose, as distinct from the purple usually associated with Advent. In some churches the vestments are rose as well. When Mass was in Latin this Third Sunday of Advent was called 'Gaudete Sunday' after the first words of the Entrance Antiphon: 'Gaudete' - 'Rejoice'. 'Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice!' These are also the opening words of today's second reading taken from Saint Paul's Letter to the Philippians (4:4). The Church is encouraging us to open our hearts to experience that special joy that comes from the Lord, for, as the Responsorial Psalm says: 'With joy you shall draw water from the wells of salvation'(Isaiah 12:3).

Christian joy transcends happiness and sorrow

The joy of which the liturgy speaks is a gift of the Holy Spirit, and it is a joy that we can experience in sorrow as in happiness. It cannot require the absence of all hurt or painful feelings. At the Last Supper when Jesus was experiencing a deep sadness in saying Goodbye to his friends, he spoke of his love for them, and his desire that they love each other, and he added: 'I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete'(John 15:11). He asked them to pray for this joy (John 16:24). On an earlier occasion he said: 'Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you because of me. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven' (Luke 6:22-23).

It is possible not only to accept the cross in our life, but to embrace it, and to do so with this special joy that is the gift of the Holy Spirit. Mary experienced this joy when she said Yes to the Incarnation; she experienced it also when she stood beneath the cross. The joy to which we are invited today is one that transcends happiness and sorrow. The Lebanese poet, Kahlil Gibran, writes (The Prophet, page 36-37):

'Your joy is your sorrow unmasked.
And the selfsame well from which your laughter rises was oftentimes filled with your tears.
How else can it be?
The more deeply sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain.
Is not the cup that holds your wine the very cup that was fired in the potter's oven?
And is not the lute that soothes your spirit the very wood that was hollowed out with knives?
When you are joyous, look deep into your heart
and you shall find that it is only that which has given you sorrow that is giving you joy.
When you are sorrowful, look again into your heart
and you shall see that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight.'

God's delight in us

The source of this joy that holds our heart in peace when we are sorrowful and when we are happy is our trust in the truth that God delights in us. Let us go back to our conception. You and I need not exist. God in his love wanted us to be part of creation, to enjoy communion with other creatures and especially to be drawn into the love of the Trinity and be part of the

communion of love that is essentially what life is. Each of us is created to contribute our own special song to the symphony of love arising to God from creation. Caryll Houselander, who converted to Catholicism early last century, has written a poem entitled 'The Reed of God'. She sees herself as a reed and asks God to play whatever music he likes upon her:

'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'(Pastoral, from the Reed of God, page 39).

In today's gospel the people ask: 'What are we to do' to be ready for the Messiah when he comes? And there *are* things for them to do. It is the same with us as we prepare for his coming this Christmas. As we were told last week, there are mountains to be levelled and valleys to be filled in; there are winding ways to be straightened and rough roads to be smoothed over. But much more important than all these is our need to prepare for the fire of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. That is to say, we are to open our hearts to the purifying fire of God's special love for us. We are to believe that God is indeed our Father and that he delights in us. Without this awareness we will neither care to clean up our lives nor have the energy to do so. The Church invites us today to turn our attention away from our own preparation and to look to God who loves us, and rejoice that he is sending his Son to be with us.

The first reading is truly extraordinary. The prophet Zephaniah pictures God as dancing with delight because of us: 'God will exult over you. God will renew you by his love. God will dance with shouts of joy for you as on a day of festival'(Zephaniah 3:18).

Saint Julian of Norwich, an English mystic of the 14th century, has the same message: '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'(Saint Julian of Norwich, Showings, chapter 23).

The need for detachment

One final point. It is good to feel good. It is good to have faithful friends. It is good to experience relationships that are stress-free. The joy for which we are praying today is such that our hearts are so fixed on God's delight in us that if these other joys are removed we feel sorrow but are not plunged into despair or desperately try to cling to unreal hopes and expectations. Such joys are a grace, but we must not cling to them, but be ready to let them go when they are withdrawn from us. Spiritual writers call this 'detachment'. They mean that our hearts are so

attached to God that we hold every other joy with open hands. We hold as a gift, not as a possession.

No one claims that this is easy. It is a discipline that we have to work on all our lives. But it is the key to discovering and retaining the joy of which today's liturgy is speaking. An anonymous author who identifies himself only as a Cistercian monk has written a book entitled 'The Hermitage within'. He states: 'Joy comes in direct proportion to detachment, and its quality depends on the urgency of your effort to be detached'(A Cistercian Monk, The Hermitage Within, page 77).

Paul expresses this well when he writes from prison to the Christian community of Philippi: 'I rejoice in the Lord greatly ... for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me'(Philippians 4:10-13).

Conclusion

So what is Christian joy? It is the joy of knowing in faith what we mean to God and what we mean to Jesus. Ruth Burrows, an English Carmelite, reminds us that spiritual joy is not an emotion. It is: '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).

Joy, in other words, is compatible with intense suffering and disappointment (1Thessalonians 1:6). It is choosing to be open to God's will, and to embrace one's life with all its ups and downs, trusting in the truth that Jesus reveals – the truth that God does delight in us and is gracing us at every moment of our existence, drawing us through every circumstance into the embrace of his love. The joy of which we are speaking is a gift of God's Spirit (Galatians 5:22). It is the joy of knowing that Christ is living in us (Galatians 2:20), the joy of experiencing his Spirit in our hearts (Galatians 4:6), the joy of knowing what God has promised us (Galatians 3:29), the joy of experiencing the love of one's brothers and sisters in the faith.

With Christmas only a fortnight away, we are invited to look forward to his coming in a special and intimate way into our hearts and into our families. May our decision to believe this open our hearts to the joy that filled the Heart of Jesus.