

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – 3rd Sunday of Advent – 12th December 2021

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How is your Advent going? Is it busy? Meaningful? Joyful?

By this point, many of us might feel weary. We don't have much time to wait for Christ, because we are trapped in pre-Christmas busyness: shopping, baking, writing cards, preparing for family gatherings, on top of other commitments. Advent is so short a time, and there are so many things we try to cram into it. Do you have time to feel joyful? Perhaps not. Why not pause today, even for the briefest moment, from the stories of doom and gloom, surrounding us, why not take off your tired, overworked, overwrought, anxious self, and try on some joy? It's Gaudete Sunday – rejoice!

But it's not easy, is it? Joy is not something one conjures.

How many times I wrote on a Christmas card: I wish you joy and peace, knowing well that joy is elusive, especially at this time of the year. Especially this year. Loneliness, family tensions, grief, deep anxieties – they are all contrasted and highlighted by the surrounding cheerfulness, and by the expectations and anticipation people are filled with at this time of the year.

You think, perhaps, that this is a paradoxical Sunday in the church year. We heard two exhortations this morning: one from the letter of Paul to the Philippians, that gave the name 'Gaudete' to this third Sunday in Advent – "Rejoice in the Lord always!" (in Latin, *Gaudete in Domino semper!*). Paul's enthusiastic encouragement resonates with the readings from the prophet Zephaniah and the canticle from Isaiah. A second exhortation comes from John the Baptist: "Bear fruits worthy of repentance!"

We also have two liturgical colours today: pink for joy and purple to indicate a penitential season. We might not find it easy to bring them together. Penitence doesn't sit very comfortably, not only with the busyness of preparing Christmas, but also with the western mindset. We're not medieval people, are we? Why

allow John the Baptist to take the floor on Gaudete Sunday? Prophets are killjoys, everybody know this.

Let Paul be centre stage for a while. Today's passage from his letter to the Philippians is one of the most luminous and warmest in his writings. "Again I say, rejoice!" I would like some clarification, though: what is it that we seek when speaking of "joy"? Absence of sorrow? An emotional high? Perpetual happiness? Deep-seated optimism?

I look around me and don't see much ground for optimism. Each day, the front page of the newspapers and the titles at the bottom of the television newscast remind me that events happen on a scale far beyond our reach and our ability to control them. Altogether, there seems to be no good news in the world. All is darkness and anxiety and fear. It is not easy to say, with Isaiah, "I will trust, and will not be afraid."

We are no different in spirit from the authors of today's scriptures. In their time, they too had to deal with the collapse of familiar social order or the consequences of dishonest and incompetent leadership, with personal or communal threats. Zephaniah, Isaiah, and Paul, they all wrote while being in situations of distress, and addressed people who, likewise, were in turmoil. Still, beyond the chaos and in spite of the hopelessness of their situations, the prophets and the apostle saw the promise of renewal, the promise of new and abundant life.

As for John the Baptist, if we listen carefully to him, we will hear a call to witness, in every moment and in every relationship, to the renewal God brings for his people.

Admittedly, the Baptist's words sound harsh. Nevertheless, we see crowds leave their homes and stream into the wilderness to listen to his severe and challenging speech, and to be baptized. They are filled with expectation, and Luke tells of John that he preached the Gospel to these people. Or, rather, to this people.

You heard, at the beginning of the scene, Luke referring to those who came out to hear John as being a 'crowd', an agglomeration of random individuals. By the end, he calls them a 'people'. In their willingness to engage with the Gospel proclaimed by John, they have been transformed from a gathering of persons into a community. Indeed, the Gospel is much more than "good news" for those

who receive it. The Gospel is a powerful, meaningful, and deeply transformative message.

To the bewildered crowd, who wanted to prepare themselves for an encounter with divine judgement and redemption, John says: “Bear fruit worthy of repentance!”. Repentance, or conversion (*metanoia* in Greek, literally meaning to change one’s mind or to turn), is the renewed relationship with God. It is the transformation of the inner self as the starting point of an external change, a reversal of the whole being. It is reconnecting with one’s true self, with God’s image that is at the very core of our being.

How could we enter the joy that is promised, unless we are changed, unless we allow our priorities to be changed, and our relationships to be renewed?

John does not call for a revolution, for a dramatic change. Yet for what seems to be, in a selfish and unjust world, minimal (or even microscopic) steps forward: Share what you have plenty of. Don’t take what is not yours. Be content with what you have been given. Don’t flee, don’t insist on looking for God far away from the grit of your days. Even if your lives are obscure, plain, difficult, inhabit them generously, honestly, faithfully. Generosity, integrity, and contentment are signs of a life that has undergone conversion.

John only asks for a minimal step forward because he trusts God to do the other steps, to renew and restore the people. No matter who came to him, John could see in their lives potential for conversion, for reconnecting with their true selves, and asked of them something significant. Maybe that is why he drew such crowds. Crowds that had the joy of becoming a people.

Beneath John’s difficult words, there is, indeed, an invitation to the joy of companionship with God. John’s message is one of both lament and hope, a reminder that things are broken, but that they will be made whole. He presents us with the joy of transformation: we can find the right path, change direction, and share in the joy of expectation, for the Lord is near.

Joy is not incidental. As Paul indicates, joy is prepared for through gentleness, constancy in thanksgiving, commitment in prayer, and letting God’s ultimate restoration of our lives shed its light upon our anxieties.

Joy also calls for mutuality. Today’s exhortations to rejoice are addressed not only to individuals, yet, above all, to communities. “Waiting together, nurturing what has already begun, expecting its fulfilment – that is the meaning of

community and the Christian life.” (Henry Nouwen, theologian and spiritual writer)

If you need sustenance for your Advent journey and beyond, take away with you this most powerful image coming from Zephaniah: “The Lord your God, is in your midst; [...] he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love, he will exult over you with loud singing, as on a day of festival.” (3.17) We celebrate not only our joy, of a people redeemed and restored, but also God’s joy, he who comes to invest the life of the world. God rejoices. God bursts into song over us. He turns to us and invites us to enter a life that is renewed in him, to joyfully draw water from the wells of salvation (Isaiah 12.3), and to let his peace, that passes all understanding, unite us with Jesus Christ our Lord (Philippians 4.7).

Amen.