

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE  
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Sermon**

**3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent – 11<sup>th</sup> December 2022**

**All Saints' Marseille**

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Today is the third Sunday in Advent – already! I didn't see the time go by! With all the rushing here and there, we can feel lost in the weeks leading up to Christmas and lose sight of the things for which we long most deeply, like joy.

Where is true joy in your life this Advent season? In the expectation of family and friends getting together? In the anticipation of Christmas cheer? Of light that dispels the darkness?

I ask you because this is Gaudete Sunday - a day which takes its name from the first word of the chant the Mass used to start with in the Middle Ages: "Rejoice in the Lord, always; again I say: rejoice!" (Philippians 4:4)

It is a paradoxical Sunday in the church year. Some of the readings encourage hopefulness and joy. "The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom," promises prophet Isaiah. "Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God," declares the Psalmist.

And then, just when we were about to feel uplifted, John the Baptist takes centre stage. If there's one thing I cannot associate with John, that's joy. We never hear him saying, "Rejoice! The kingdom of heaven is near." Only "Repent!"

Last week, Matthew took us to the wilderness of Judea to get to know John, who lived dramatically, wearing clothing of camel's hair, eating whatever he could find there – locusts, wild honey – preaching a strong message of repentance and preparing the hearts of the people who flocked to listen to him to receive the Messiah. He offered them a baptism of repentance, as a symbol of liberation from

the slavery of sin, which made people ready to greet their Saviour. He followed his calling with zeal and passion.

Today, Matthew takes us to a prison cell, to a broken John the Baptist. As far as John can tell, the Messiah, who was expected to make the world new, to bring justice and order to human institutions, has changed nothing. Nothing has worked out as this disillusioned prisoner thought it would, and all he has left is a question for Jesus: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

Remember that John was expecting the Messiah to come with the fire of judgment: "His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Instead, Jesus came with mercy and forgiveness, and a willingness to suffer for the sake of God's kingdom. What kind of Messiah was that? It was the Messiah God intended, not the one John had imagined. Jesus came and did the works of God: "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them." What more to expect of the one who is to come?

What do we expect of the Christ at his coming among us? We want him to give clear helpful answers to our questions – now. We want him to relieve us from our burdens – now. We want evidence that a great transformation is truly underway – now. Patience is a virtue difficult to be practised.

Even after the rejoicing of two thousand Christmases, we come back, again and again, to the place of wilderness, the place of yearning and waiting for the coming of Christ that is promised but that we don't really understand – as John the Baptist seemed not to have understood. We are discouraged by the apparently slow progress of all our efforts, and by the reappearance of the powers of evil and their apparent victories. Because of the noise around us – and in us – we so often do not hear the gentle sound and the movement of the life that is coming into being.

But here and there, God lets us feel how he is at work. The light will shine, perhaps just when it seems to us that the darkness is impenetrable.

All his life John waited for the Messiah; his lifestyle, his very body is shaped by this expectation. Yet he had to convert his idea of God's Messiah. Like John, we too are

called to recognise that God does not always come into our lives the way we expect. Advent is a good time of converting our idea of God and recognising new or different ways Christ comes into our lives.

Jesus Christ comes even now with a gentle strength, and brings the fullness of God's kingdom. Not to satisfy all of our personal expectations, but to satisfy the deepest needs and longings of the whole creation: healing and hope; forgiveness and new life. The need for God's presence, and God's promise, that we belong to God no matter what!

Joy emerges from the deep belief that in the end, as in the beginning, God rules the world. And that sin and evil cannot erase the fundamental goodness with which God endowed his creation. Joy believes that goodness and grace endure and will one day be all in all.

Do you see God at work? Through those who pray and work for peace? As people support and care for those who are struggling? As forgiveness is offered and received, and reconciliation begins? This is the season of joy – there are reasons to rejoice and give thanks.

But, even as I say that, I know that it's not always easy to rejoice. Despite the merchandised cheeriness of the season, many find themselves in places of wilderness, of dryness, places of weak hands and feeble knees, of fearful hearts, places where eyes are blind and ears are deaf and legs are lame and tongues made speechless. You may have cares and concerns that are quenching your joy. And to be told to rejoice today may only be adding to your cares, not taking them away.

The spiritual writer Henri Nouwen once said: "Joy does not simply happen to us. We have to choose joy and keep choosing it every day. It is a choice based on the knowledge that we belong to God and have found in God our refuge and our safety and that nothing, not even death, can take God away from us."

Looking for joy on this Gaudete Sunday doesn't mean ignoring all that is wrong in the world. But it does mean paying attention to what is right, what is of God, what is a sign that God is still at work in the world, in our congregation, in our community. Tell what you hear and see as you proclaim the joy of the presence of God. And pray that we ourselves become signs of the kingdom to those who are watching and waiting for God, and that the world be transformed when we pass through.

May we awaken on Christmas morning to the joy of life transformed in Christ,  
unexpected, more than we had dared even to ask for.

Amen.