

Homily for the 3rd Sunday of Advent, Year C

Vigil Mass and St Dunstan's, 12th/13th December 2015

Today is Gaudete Sunday – Gaudete is the Latin for joy and joy features in our liturgy this morning: it is mentioned in the entrance antiphon, in the opening prayer, in the reading from Zephaniah (the only reading from this minor prophet in the lectionary), and in the Philippians reading. You might have missed the word in Philippians this morning because the Jerusalem Bible is sometimes an unfaithful translator of the Greek original text. You heard Jayne Coke say “I want you to be happy, always happy in the Lord”. A better translation says “Rejoice in the Lord always and again I say rejoice”, the entrance antiphon. So happiness doesn't come into it, but joy does.

So Joy, what is it that we are to be joyful about? Pope Francis had the answer in the first document he wrote to us *Evangelii Gaudium*, the joy of the gospel. The letter starts

“The joy of the gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Christ. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness.”

So we are joyful because our salvation is at hand and we have been set free from our sins. We can start again, we are saved by Christ.

It was John the Baptist, centre stage in today's gospel, who announced the good news of salvation.

Another reason to be joyful is because, following the Nativity and Incarnation, God is in our midst and he dwells among us. The Christian God is not a remote and terrible figure; God came and dwelled among us, as a man. As we approach our commemoration of the Incarnation at Christmas – we are half way through Advent now – the feeling of excited anticipation is growing and showing through in the liturgy.

- **Joy** because our salvation is at hand, we have been saved from our sins.
- **Joy** because God is in our midst.

We take advantage of the first expression of joy in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Pope Francis urges us to make use of this sacrament in the Jubilee Year, the Year of Mercy, a year in which we acknowledge that we have received a totally unmerited and undeserved gift, the gift of God's mercy and forgiveness. In this parish the sacrament is available on Saturday and Sunday mornings, and this week, on Wednesday, at 7:30 pm we are holding an Advent Reconciliation service in the Abbey Church.

John the Baptist is the signpost to the joy of our salvation. We follow his pointing out the road to joy, that we **are** saved and God **is with us** today in our own hopes, fears, joys and sorrows.

We are familiar with following signposts, directions to somewhere we've not been before. For example to a new pub or a National Trust house, a PYO farm, a Bed & Breakfast. We follow a series of signs along the unfamiliar route. There are twists and turns in the road, some turnings are not obvious, we might miss a turning and we go past it before we realise, the route is longer

than we thought. But the joy of arriving at our destination, that little country pub, the magnificently restored stately home.....

In today's gospel people came to him in three groups and asked about the route, they said "What must we do?" And John gives each an answer.

- To the people he says: Share your bread, give away your spare tunic.
- To the tax collector: Charge a fair rate.
- To the soldier: No intimidation, no extortion.

Notice, these are not extraordinary things; they are simply acts of justice

These answers from John are a beginning. Through conversion and repentance we accept God's mercy and we start to shape our lives into the new creation that Christ wants us to be. John's answers ask us to reconsider how we live in several areas of life: our use of property and share of the world's resources; our responsible use of power and influence; the ethics of our business and work practices.

The church has a long history of teaching on these areas. For example, St Basil the Great in the 4th Century said: "The bread you do not use is the bread of the hungry. The coat hanging unused in your closet belongs to the person who needs it. The shoes rotting in your closet belong to the person with no shoes. The money you put in the bank belongs to the poor."

Today Pope Francis is giving us a strong lead in these areas. His encyclical *Laudato' Si* – the Care of our Common Home, addresses issues of sustainability, of climate changes. The refugee crisis in Europe, which Francis has also addressed, is an immediate challenge for all of us.

John's preaching is pointing to a change in the hearts of his hearers, his is a call to conversion and repentance. We are called to a personal repentance each Advent as we are called to follow Christ more closely.

John the Baptist has started the process and pointed the way. Jesus will complete the action with the judgement of the winnowing fan, with fire and the Holy Spirit, which awaits all of us.