

Third Sunday of Advent

December 17, 2023

Today we enter the third week of the season of Advent. Liturgically, this Sunday is called “Gaudete Sunday” because the Mass for today (in its original Latin text), begins with the opening antiphon: “Gaudete in Domino semper” –“Rejoice in the Lord always.” And to remind ourselves that we are preparing for the very joyful occasion of the birth of Jesus, we light the rose candle in the Advent wreath, and the priest may wear rose vestments. The common theme of the day’s Scripture readings is one of joy and encouragement. And the readings urge us to make the preparations required of us as we await the rebirth of Jesus in our hearts and in our lives. The Holy Scripture reminds us that the coming of Jesus, past, present, and future, is the reason for our rejoicing.

From our first reading the Prophet Isaiah encourages the Jewish exiles returning from Babylon to rejoice because their God, Yahweh, is their strong Guide, Provider and Protector.

In our Responsorial Psalm, we see Mary rejoicing in the great blessing given to her, exclaiming: “My soul glorifies the Lord; my spirit finds joy in God my Savior.”

St. Paul the Apostle in his second letter to the Thessalonians advises the Christians to “rejoice always” by leading blameless, holy and thankful lives guided by the Holy Spirit, because Christ’s second coming is near, and he (Christ) is faithful in his promise to reward them.

Today’s Gospel reminds us that John the Baptist came to bear witness to Jesus as the Light of the world. And that the Baptist wants all the Jews to rejoice because the long-expected Messiah, the light of the world, will remove the darkness of sin from the world. We rejoice at the humility of John the Baptist, who tells the Sanhedrin who are challenging him that he is even unworthy to become the slave of Jesus the Messiah. Today you and me are encouraged also to rejoice in the sincerity and commitment of

John who spent himself completely in preparing people for the long-awaited Messiah. We have an additional reason to rejoice because, like John the Baptist, we too, are chosen to bear witness to Christ Jesus, the Light of the world.

St. Paul the Apostle, in his First Letter to the Thessalonians, writes very simply,

“Rejoice always.”

But what exactly does Apostle Paul mean to rejoice always? Am I supposed to be “happy” and “sunny” no matter what? Am I supposed to always be smiling? Am I supposed to act as if I don’t have a care in the world? Am I supposed never to feel sorrow or pain or disappointment? Or if I do, am I never supposed to show it?

I don’t know about you, but if that’s the case, then I’m in trouble. It’s not always easy to know what God wants of us (other than in a very general sense). But when we struggle and wrestle with these sorts of things we don’t have to simply “figure it out” on our own. We do have someone we can turn to and look to, we have Jesus, the One we are called to follow and imitate. And when we look at his life, when we look at what he said and did, it should be clear that this thing we call “joy” is not simply walking around as if we don’t have a care in the world. After all, Jesus:

Cried when his friend Lazarus died.

Got frustrated when his disciples didn’t understand him.

Showed anger toward the money-changers in the temple.

Grew weary of the crowds, and needed to get away from them from time to time.

Scolded and challenged the Pharisees and other religious leaders time and time again.

And of course, he wondered and hoped if the “cup” could be taken away from him.

So, whatever “joy” is, it’s clearly not the same as how we commonly use that word. I guess the best way to understand the kind of “joy” we are called to, is to first try to answer the question “Why?” Why should we be joyful? What is there to be joyful about?

Of course, the answer lies in what we are preparing to celebrate in eight short days. My dear friends, what we are preparing for this Advent is to once again welcome our God into our lives, our hearts, and our world. This season reminds us of the tremendous love God has for each of us, a love beyond our wildest imagination. This is a God who loves us so much that he refused to sit on the sidelines, but rather, chose to break into our world in a profound way, to make sure we knew that he would never leave us, never abandon us, never ask us to make our journey through life alone. Jesus does nothing but love. Nothing but forgive. Nothing but care. Nothing but walk with us hand in hand. Nothing but save.

That’s the God we have! And that’s what real joy is all about - being secure in the most profound truths we can imagine. And this kind of joy is a joy that doesn’t falsely replace our other emotions, doesn’t try to cover-up all of the authentic feelings we might have. Rather true joy is the kind of joy that infuses every aspect of our lives, every thought, and every action. And that’s because true joy comes from only one place, from our living God who’s dwelling within each of our human heart.

And this allows us continue to see the good in people even when we get frustrated with them. It allows us to forgive those who have wronged us. It allows us not to despair even though we are crying from our pain or the pain of others. It allows us to remain hopeful in the face of disappointment. And it allows us to always believe deeply that tomorrow can be better than today.

I believe that’s a very good the reason to rejoice! Not because all of our problems and crosses are going to magically disappear. But because the difficulties, the challenges and the disappointments of our lives will never

win, they will never get the best of us. God wins. And God indeed wins every time.

The Incarnation is an evidence of that. The virgin birth is evidence of that. The cross is evidence of that. So let's get ready to allow God into our hearts in a profound way this Christmas, so that joy never leaves us, no matter what we are facing.

And don't worry, that doesn't mean you have to smile on the outside all the time. Just on the inside too.