

Third Sunday In Advent—Year C

Zechariah 3.14-18a

Philippians 4.4-7

Luke 3.10-18

Gaudete Sunday falls in the middle of the Advent Season, although Christmas is only a short 9 days away this year. The word *Gaudete* means *Rejoice*, and is drawn from the Entrance Antiphon for today's liturgy, which is taken from *Philippians 4.4: Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice. Indeed the Lord is near.* This is one of only two annual liturgies where, if they are available, rose-coloured vestments may be worn, to contrast from the usual penitential purple that is used in this season. Although rose-coloured vestments are not available for this Mass, it is also marked by the rose-coloured candle on the advent wreath.

The First Reading is drawn from the *Book of the Prophet Zephaniah*. The scripture scholar John Bergsma says the following about this Old Testament Book:

Zephaniah prophesied during the reign of one of the last kings of Judah (Josiah, 641-609 BC), and had mostly condemnatory things to say about Judah and the surrounding nations. The conclusion of his prophecy, however, from which this First Reading is taken, speaks in glowing terms of a restoration God will enact far in the future.

In this reading, the faithful people of God are personified as "daughter Zion," and the LORD is described as a bridegroom. The language of "rejoice over you," "renew you in his love,"

“sing joyfully because of you,” describes the behavior of a bridegroom. Many Advent/Christmas texts have nuptial themes, because the incarnation of Christ is the “wedding” of two natures, human and divine. God weds his nature to ours in Christ. Furthermore, Jesus is the promised “bridegroom king” from the line of David, fulfilling many texts which describe the king from the line of David as the ideal spouse.

We are reminded that Jesus comes not only as King, one whose kingship will be forever, in fulfillment of the Prophet Nathan’s prophecy of a kingly descendant of David establishing an eternal kingdom, but also as a bridegroom. Jesus ‘weds’ our nature to himself through his incarnation, and as bridegroom bonds us to himself, as close and intimate as a nuptial bond. The Reading also looks forward to various forms of communion that we experience with Jesus our bridegroom. The Eucharist, where we receive his body into ours and become “one flesh” with him, is a very intimate act of union with Christ. There is also unitive prayer, the highest form of prayer, where we are joined with him in Spirit and pass through the stage of discourse through words into a deeper union that surpasses words.

The Second Reading, from which the Entrance Antiphon is drawn, is taken from *St. Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*. Here St. Paul not only reminds us to rejoice, but also presents tangible means to help us to rejoice always. The keys to a lifetime of rejoicing can be found in the exercise of the following:

(1) not being anxious, through abandonment to God's providence, (2) showing kindness to everyone, (3) making constant practice of prayer as an antidote to worry, including intercession, supplication, and especially thanksgiving in our prayer. All these exercises express a sense of gratitude and thanksgiving, without which patience, kindness and contentment could not be possible either.

Again, the Scholar John Bergsma has the following to say concerning today's Gospel Reading:

This Sunday marks the last time in Advent when our attention is going to be focused on the figure of John the Baptist, the one who announced the coming of Jesus. In this reading, we see a shift from his teaching to his prophecy of the one who was to come after him, Jesus. Yet this Gospel is a bit bracing: talking about "burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire" doesn't seem to fit the theme of rejoicing that characterizes this liturgy? So how does this Gospel relate to the theme of rejoicing, and how can we really rejoice this Sunday, despite all the challenges that face us personally and in the wider culture? The call to rejoice may seem a little hollow. We are facing so many challenges on a personal and public level. There are financial stresses, health problems, deadlines at work, dysfunctional relationships with family members. On a culture-wide perspective, there are widespread terrorist attacks, political setbacks, various forms of persecution from the annoying to the lethal, scandalous controversy with mutual public recriminations among prelates within the Church, new

allegations of abuse with the Church, a general hostility to religion and particularly Catholicism, and a worldwide contracting economy. So, in the midst of this, how do we rejoice?

Its healthy to remind ourselves that the Good News is not that Jesus came to give us an upper-class lifestyle with a two-stall garage, three kids, and a house in the suburbs for the duration of our lifetime. One cannot find any such articulation of the Gospel in the New Testament. Instead, one finds expressions like, "if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me" (Luke 9:23). Or "Blessed are those persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 5:12). Or "In this world you will have trouble; but take heart, I have overcome the world!" (John 16:33).

We need to keep reminding ourselves that the Good News is not a plan for temporal comfort in this life, because it is our tendency to revert to thinking that it is. And when we look around and see that things are not comfortable, even after 2000 years, we mistakenly think the Good News has not worked.

The Good News is about eternal life with God through Jesus Christ, which starts now, but won't be directly seen until the life in the world to come! The Good News really is about heaven, and what lies beyond the grave!

Temporal comfort is not the answer to our deepest needs. Even if Jesus were to give everyone who believes in him total economic and political stability for the duration of our temporal life, it would not satisfy the longing of the human heart, which is made for so much more.

People sometimes warn of “being too heavenly minded to be any earthly good.” That is not biblical. On the contrary, one has to be “heavenly minded” to be any “earthly good,” because only the “heavenly minded” have the joy and courage to endure the sacrifices necessary to make substantial contributions to the “earthly good.”

The exhortation to rejoice in the first two readings and psalm are not based on some external reality, but on an interior and eternal reality: that Christ has come, and taken up residence in our hearts, giving us communion with God even now, and in the life to come. This is truly Good News!

The Gospel Reading can be seen as an application of that Good News. Share your food and your clothes with the poor, the Baptist tells the people. Be content with your proper wages, he tells the tax collectors and soldiers. Such are the actions of people who are not living for this life. If this life was all there was, the logical thing to do would be to hoard your food and clothes, and strive to make money any way possible. What permits this joyful lifestyle of sharing and contentment is the confidence that we are headed for an eternal reward that makes temporal wealth seem insignificant in comparison. As St.

Paul says, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us."

This Gaudete Sunday gives us the opportunity to remind ourselves what the Gospel really is all about, why we should be people of joy, and how to live the generous lifestyle of people who aren't living for the here and now.