

### **3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent-C**

Today, the third Sunday of Advent, is known as 'Gaudete' Sunday from the first word of the entrance antiphon, which is in turn the first verse of the second reading 'Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice'. This is rather lost in our mundane translation where it is turned into 'I want you to be happy, always happy in the Lord'. This third Sunday is full of a sense of joy and rejoicing - the words joy and rejoicing appear once in the Opening Prayer, four times in the first reading, twice in the psalm and twice more in the second reading. Here, in the middle of Advent, we are clearly meant to think about joy. Clearly there is an element of anticipation about this: the birth of the Savior is close. But this seems a good opportunity to think about joy more generally. What is it, and where does it come from? Most important of all, how can we find it and keep hold of it?

Obviously joy, which is one of the fruits of the Spirit, is much more than happiness or pleasure. It is something that goes deeper than either of those, something that is less easily disturbed than either of those. Whereas happiness and pleasure depend on circumstances, on the kind of day I am having, joy is more like a fundamental attitude, a key to the way I live, something that affects everything I do or say.

I would like to suggest to you an image of human life which is very familiar, but which gives us some insight into the real meaning of Christian joy. We are very much at home with the idea that our lives are a kind of a journey; that in any lifetime there is a sense of progress and movement. We leave behind the places where we once were, the people that we once were, and we move onwards. But we are seldom able to take this image much further. What was the starting point of this journey? What will be its destination? I would like to suggest to you that joy finds its roots in the serene and peaceful knowledge of where I have come from, who I am journeying with, and where I will find myself in the end.

It is impossible to plan a journey unless you know where you are starting from. The starting point for Christian joy is a deep certainty of the place from which I am setting out. In one sense, of course, my starting point is my country of birth, and my family, and that is why people feel such a sense of attachment to their birthplaces, and such a need to know more

about their families, more about their parents, more about the communities from which they spring. But for us, as followers of Jesus Christ whose lives of faith began at the baptismal font, it is also essential for us to know and understand the Church which is our origin, the faith which is our home.

My faith journey began at that font, and I can never have any hope of finding joy unless I understand and take to heart the place from which I set out. Joy depends on knowing, loving and treasuring the Church and the faith which it proclaims. If we want to be joyful people we have to begin here. We have to start from a commitment to learn more about our faith, trying to understand it more. We have to begin from a conscious choice that we wish to be closer to the heart of the Church. Of course, there is much about the Church that is not perfect, there is much that could be made better; but we have to be able to distinguish from the faults and failures of the people who make up the Church, and the beautiful truths of the Christian faith. Sometimes our confidence takes a knock when we hear people criticizing the Church; we are not sure quite how to answer them, and doubts begin to set in. That is the time to set about learning more, understanding more. I do not recognize a Christianity that is negative, depressing, restrictive and joyless.

The first step on the path to joy is to understand more fully the place from which we begin, to know and love our faith, and the Church which proclaims it, better. The second step is to take to heart who it is that travels with us. On every step of our journey we are accompanied by the risen Jesus. We are deeply, profoundly, absolutely and unconditionally loved by Him, and he is always beside us. Zephaniah and the psalmist tell the people to rejoice because the Lord is in their midst; Paul tells the Philippians to rejoice because the Lord is very near. There is no doubt that essential to Christian joy is faith and trust that Christ walks beside us, and that he loves us. Finally, joy depends on a trusting acceptance of where we are headed. We might know where we began, and with whom we are travelling, but unless we are sure of where we are going joy will elude us, and be replaced by uncertainty. For that reason we must be very clear that God plans for us to spend eternity with him; his plan is that the end of our journey will be 'like plunging into the ocean of infinite love, a moment in which time - the before and after - no longer exists' (Benedict XVI *Spe Salvi* n. 12).

Advent invites us to a renewed sense of joy, because without joy there can be no true witness to Christ. If we feel little or no joy in our faith, the problem lies with us. It means we have lost contact with those things that really matter, and been seduced by things of lesser value. We need to readjust our priorities in life, to go to confession and leave behind the old self. We need to reassert once again our confidence in where we have come from, in who we are travelling with, and in where we will end up for all eternity.

- Fr. David M. Chiantella