

3rd SUNDAY OF ADVENT – B (December 17, 2023)

From Isaiah: “I rejoice heartily in the Lord, in my God is the joy of my soul”; from St. Paul: “Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. In all circumstances give thanks”. Quite the joy-filled readings today, aren’t they? That’s what this third Sunday of Advent is all about: challenging us to be a joy-filled people. This Sunday is traditionally referred to as ‘Gaudete Sunday’, ‘gaudete’ being the Latin word for ‘rejoice.’

But as we look around us in this world, in our nation, and maybe even in our own homes and families, we may wonder: ‘how can I ‘rejoice always’ when war and other violence keep rearing their ugly heads, when there is such bitterness and hatred dividing us as a nation, when I’m struggling with family divisions, with illness, or when I’m still grieving the death of a loved one?’ What is joy in the first place? Webster’s describes it on one level as an emotion brought about by a sense of well-being, success or good fortune. There’s no doubt that we can indeed feel these good things when all is going well for us.

But what if things are not going well for us; does that mean that the experience of joy is impossible? No, it doesn’t. Back in 1975, Pope St. Paul VI gave us a deeper understanding of joy that goes beyond a surface level of happiness, of ‘everything’s going my way’. In his letter “Gaudete in Domino” (Latin for ‘rejoice in the Lord’), the Holy Father spoke of joy as the most noble expression of happiness—when we find ‘peace and satisfaction in the possession of a known and loved good.’ He then said we know that peace most profoundly when we know and love God as the supreme, the perfect, and the ultimate good. Pope Francis made the same point in his 2014 letter on “The Joy of the Gospel”. He acknowledged that we don’t always feel happy or filled with joy; again, life doesn’t always allow that. But he reminds us that joy ‘always endures, even as...our personal certainty that, when everything is said and done, we are infinitely loved’.

That’s the key; that’s why we can indeed ‘rejoice always’, why we can be people of joy...even if the world seems to be crashing down around us on all sides. Joy is ultimately a gift—a gift from God, that One by whom we are ‘infinitely loved’. We can’t produce joy all by ourselves, but it’s the natural result of remembering with gratitude that Jesus is the ultimate proof of God’s infinite love for us. Actually, I should say it is the supernatural result of that gratitude—after all, joy is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit. And that is joy at its deepest and most powerful level: being one with God who is our supreme good and ultimate goal. That is our deepest longing, and it exists in every soul—regardless of how aware or unaware we are of that longing. Bishop Fulton Sheen once said “You were made for God. Nothing short of the Infinite satisfies you.” That’s precisely why those who chase after the things of the world for their joy are doomed to frustration—whether money, power, unlimited pleasure, or social media popularity or ‘influence’. Nothing at all that is less than God can bring us the lasting joy for which we all long and for which we are all made.

Some of the most joy-filled people I’ve ever known have had really heavy crosses to bear, but their love for Jesus and their joy in him was so strong and genuine—you could even see it in their eyes and hear it in their voices. On the other hand, I’ll bet most if not all of us have known those who call themselves Christian but who seem to have a perpetual chip on their shoulders, who always have reasons to complain and find fault with this person or that situation. What is joyful or attractive about that approach to life? Little if anything at all.

Joy is a gift from God and a fruit of the Holy Spirit. That means that joy is available to us thanks to the amazing generosity of God. So joy is a choice we make—let’s choose to be a person of joy. That

doesn't mean that we have to pretend that everything is perfect and we have no problems; that's not reality in any case.

The current issue of Our Sunday Visitor has a great reflection on these readings and this Gaudete Sunday; the author says:

“And so, if you're not feeling joyful, that's okay. Don't think you're a bad Catholic...if you don't feel the way you think you're supposed to feel. The mystery and gift of Advent and Christmas is not about feelings. It's about Christ. So, whatever you're feeling—this Sunday is still for you. Because Christ is still for you. Because he loves you.”

“The mystery and gift of Advent and Christmas is not about feelings. It's about Christ.” Those are words worthy of remembering; maybe of writing on a post-it and putting on your bathroom mirror or some other such place. Genuine joy is always within our grasp, it's always available—by uniting ourselves with Jesus in praise and gratitude for what he has already given and done for us. “Rejoice always”, St. Paul urges us. Let's choose to rejoice by embracing the transforming power of the truth and love of Jesus. Let's choose joy; God offers it to every one of us. He simply waits in love for us to accept and live it with gratitude and purpose.