

3rd Sunday of Advent (B)  
(Isaiah 61:1-2, 10-11 / John 1:6-8, 19-28)  
14.12.2014

The liturgy of this *Gaudete Sunday* contains within it a strong call to **joy in the Lord**. Our Opening Chant set the scene: *Rejoice in the Lord. Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say rejoice*. It went on to proclaim the reason for our joy: *The Lord is near*. It is the Lord's proximity which is the source and the cause of our joy.

Paul wrote these words of invitation to joy in the Lord at one of the most difficult moments of his life. He was incarcerated. It was from a place of captivity and suffering that he issued his call to happiness.

This shows us that true happiness, real joy, can be found in every situation - even the most unpleasant, indeed, the very worst - on condition that we recognise that the Lord is near at hand and that He is at work.

We can be hopeful and confident, trusting and assured, at peace and in joy, when we realise that Christ is with us. It is Christ's presence which holds us in serenity, even in the face of the most painful and difficult life situations. Peace and joy will be held on to, or rather they will hold on to us, even in suffering, as long as our focus is on Christ.

Later on in chapter 4 of Paul's Letter to the Philippians (the Scriptural context from which today's Opening Chant is taken), the apostle shares his experience with us by way of encouragement. He writes: *I have learned how to get along happily whether I have much or little. I can rejoice at all times and in every circumstance, for I know how to live on almost nothing or with everything. I have learned the secret of contentment in every situation, whether it be of full stomach or hunger, plenty or want*.

Again I remind you of the physical circumstances in which Paul found himself when he wrote those words. He was in a Roman prison. He was waiting to learn if his fate would be execution. And yet we hear no lamentation. There is no cry: *woe is me!* We detect no whining or '*whinging*', as they say in Belfast-English. There is no complaint.

Paul had clearly learned the secret to serenity, and, even more than serenity, the secret to true joy: the simple acceptance of all the things that we cannot change in our lives.

There is a real challenge for us here.

I hear Paul challenging us to accept those circumstances in our lives over which we have no control, trusting in the Lord that He will make *everything work for our good*, as long as we go with Him and allow ourselves to be led by His grace, believing, as Julian of Norwich puts it, that *in all manner of things all shall be well*.

If we are unhappy, weary, weighed down, discouraged and sad - and let's admit it can happen that we all find ourselves that way at times - is this not often because we are resisting something deep down within us that is crying out for our attention, clamouring for us to pay heed to it?

Maybe it is that we have just never accepted the painful realities and hurtful circumstances of our lives as they have evolved - frequently over and beyond our control.

To get caught into a struggle against who and what we are, the way things have gone for us, the sometimes unjust circumstances we have encountered ... Or again to get caught into a struggle against the positive aspects of our lives, for it can happen that we struggle as much with our gifts, our talents and abilities as we do with what is amiss in our lives ... Whatever it is we are struggling with, our interior combat can have such a life-draining/energy-sapping effect upon us.

It can rob us of our *joie de vivre* and impede us from living as God would have us live: comfortably,

at ease, at home in our own skin, reconciled with the story that is ours ... in a word, in freedom of heart.

The passage into freedom, the attainment of ease with oneself, of which I speak here, is the result of our welcoming the salvation that Christ offers.

Being at home with oneself in simple contentment, filled with an inner happiness, an interior joy ... Here we have the gift which accompanies openness to the liberation the Messiah brings, the salvation which today's liturgy has us celebrate as being near at hand.

It is by welcoming the Saviour who stoops down to us in our misery that we are led to traverse and to break from all the bonds that hold us captive in order to enter into freedom God has always desired for us.

The Messiah also comes to bring us healing from the wounds that debilitate us.

If we are to know this healing we must first of all be willing to face up to the hurts and pain of our lives. Moreover, we must accept our part of responsibility in regard to the debilitating effects these wounds have had upon us. We have to be courageous enough to admit that very often by our reactions to the wrongs done to us we have allowed ourselves to get caught into self-destructive behaviours and attitudes.

What God wants to see us enjoy is life: life in freedom of heart, and fullness of well-being.

It is the Messiah's mission to lead God's People into freedom and good health in every sense.

Just think of those words from Isaiah (we heard them in today's first reading) with which Jesus inaugurated His ministry in the Synagogue of Nazareth: *He sent me to bring Good News, to offer liberty and healing, to give new sight and set people free from all that cripples them*

This same message has been confided to us.

As God's messianic people we are called to live this message for ourselves and to proclaim it to others in our turn.

*The Twelve-Step Programme* people speak of the responsibility that befalls all those who have had a spiritual awakening and are engaged in the way of recovery as being to try to carry the message of life in freedom to others.

As Christians we are called to have the same conviction and commitment when it comes to sharing our Good News, but, I wonder if we have the level of commitment we should have in this respect.

The best proclamation of the Good News of redemption is a life that is clearly a life lived as *a free person under grace*. Such a life is a beautiful sight to behold. When people see it they gain hope, for they see the glory of God at work in a fellow human being and this is an encouragement to them.

When someone has known from experience a depth of human suffering, when they have worked their way through real affliction and felt their brokenness, when they have endured emotional, spiritual, psychological pain, when they have struggled long and hard, when they have been enslaved by an addiction or some compulsive behaviour or self-destructive thought pattern from which they have broken free, then they can relate to other people who are struggling and give them hope in their longing for liberation.

When others see that we have somehow managed to come through safely, having traversed the valley of darkness, deep shadow and near death, then they will be encouraged to believe that redemption is also within their grasp, and that they too can come through, with the help of God's grace.

Like John the Baptist - without taking ourselves to be the messiah and/or presenting ourselves to

others as such - we are all called *to bear witness to the light*.

I see one of the great challenges set before us on this Advent day as being to believe that, with the help of God, we in our turn can bring Good News to those who need it.

Understand me. I am not talking about adopting a preachy stance and bombarding others with words. That rarely works. Indeed, it can be counter-productive and only turn others off rather than enthuse them. To go at others in a heavy or a haughty way, talking down to them, demanding too much of them too soon, frequently only serves to alienate them. It makes the gospel inaccessible to those who need its message most.

We proclaim the Good News best by living our lives in freedom of heart, or, as Pope Francis keeps reminding us, by simply reflecting *the joy of the gospel*.

Those who have experienced God's healing grace in their lives are in a uniquely privileged position to speak of the grace that has touched and transformed their lives.

They can announce the gospel in a way that makes its core message accessible to the broken-hearted, for the simple reason that they know what it is to have been broken-hearted and how a broken heart beats.

When we are broken-hearted, what do we need most?

Is it not just someone to be there for us?

Is it not, at certain moments, simply to have someone who dares to hold us close to their heart in a way that lets us hear that their heart is beating with love for us?

The loving heartbeat of one who cares for us in our heart-brokenness can become for us nothing less for us than an echo of the heartbeat of God Himself.

Let us remember that while we need loving, caring, witnesses to God's love for us - people to stand by our side at our low-ebb moments - so too we are also called to be privileged witnesses to God's love for others, people who need us to be there for them in their hour of need.

Only one who has known the darkness of death and has come through it into an experience of light and new life, can credibly bear witness to the Risen Christ who leads all those held captive into freedom.

Such a liberated, God-enlightened person can show to others how the darkness of death has been scattered by the light of the Risen Christ. They can bear witness to what we confess in our Creed when we say that *Christ descended into hell*.

It is vital for us to remember that Christ dares to enter into the dark regions of our hellish underworld, that He is not afraid of the sombre regions of our minds and hearts, the tombs in which we take refuge, foolishly seeking out the false security we imagine the grave can offer us.

Christ who has descended into hell and has stretched out His arm to save all held captive there, pulls us up out of the black abyss in which we sometimes find (or even place) ourselves.

Just as the image of Jesus descending into hell to free waiting Adam and Eve gives us hope, so those one who have found themselves in the living hell of acute pain and suffering and have emerged from that dark place can become for their brothers and sisters a living proclamation of God's power to save.

They can become for others icons of the Risen Christ

May we, like John the Baptist, the great witness set before us this morning as an example to follow, be humble enough to recognise that while we are not the Messiah, Elijah or the prophet, nonetheless come to realise that we are called to be witnesses to the light which is Christ.

Like John, we are all called to point beyond ourselves to the One whose coming we await: Christ.

The way we can proclaim Christ and the gospel's power to save is to seek to encounter Jesus again and again and to live in an on-going friendship with Him.

We bear witness to Christ by believing and disposing ourselves to be continually set free, constantly healed of the wounds of sin in our lives by God's merciful grace.

Pope Francis is constantly reminding us of something Friedrich Nietzsche flagged up as a real problem long before him: *If only Christians actually looked a little more as if they actually believed themselves to be redeemed!*

It seems right to me on this *Gaudete Sunday* to echo some of the words found in the teaching document Pope Francis has addressed to all Christians recently in his work on *The Joy of the Gospel*.

By way of conclusion to this reflection upon the call addressed to us to joy in the Lord, I leave space now to the actual words of Pope Francis' Encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium*.

He writes therein:

*I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting Him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day. No one should think that this invitation is not meant for him or her, since 'no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord'. (para. 3)*

*Thanks solely to this encounter - or renewed encounter - with God's love, which blossoms into an enriching friendship, we are liberated from our narrowness and self-absorption. We become fully human when we become more than human, when we let God bring us beyond ourselves in order to attain the fullest truth of our being. Here we find the source and inspiration of all our efforts at evangelization. For if we have received the love which restores meaning to our lives, how can we fail to share that love with others?(para. 8)*

*Let us recover and deepen our enthusiasm, that 'delightful and comforting joy of evangelizing', even when it is in tears that we must sow ... And may the world of our time which is searching, sometimes with anguish, sometimes with hope, be enabled to receive the Good News from evangelizers who are not dejected, discouraged, impatient or anxious, but from ministers of the Gospel whose lives glow with fervour, who have first received the joy of Christ. (para. 10)*

*Gaudete!*

Let us rejoice in the Lord!

Let us become for our brothers and sisters heralds of *the joy of the Gospel!*

Amen.