

Rejoice

16 12 12

O Lord, Jesus Christ,
who at your first coming sent your messenger
to prepare your way before you;
grant that the ministers and stewards of your mysteries
may likewise so prepare and make ready your way
by turning the hearts of the disobedient
to the wisdom of the just,
that at your second coming to judge the world
we may be found an acceptable people in your sight.

My text can be found in Paul's Letter to the Philippians, chapter 4 and verse 4:

'Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.'

Advent and Lent are both times of reflection and preparation when we look forward to an important, significant event in the life of Christ: Christmas – his Incarnation and birth; and Easter – his death and Resurrection. A sign that this is a serious time is the lack of flowers in church. Usually, there is the colour and the smell of fresh flowers here to contribute to the warm, prayerful peace that visitors so appreciate when they come through our open doors during the week. In Advent, their absence, like the liturgical colour purple, is a visual aid to remind us of the need to be quiet and thoughtful as we prepare ourselves spiritually for Christmas. But today, on the third Sunday in Advent, Gaudete Sunday, a word in

Latin which means rejoice, the colour of the priest's vestments are rose pink to remind us of the joy that should be the foundation of the Christian life.

Is it not odd, surely, to claim that joy is the keynote of the Christian life? Is it not strange that Paul in chains in prison should write to the church at Philippi these extraordinary words which are our text today: 'Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.'? How can we square the circle that on the one hand we are supposed to be joyful always with the fact of our experience that life can be challenging, painful, sad?

Two things. First – what is the difference between happiness and joy? Second – what have we got to rejoice about?

Happiness is the feeling of pleasure that comes from particular circumstances. We can be happy in all sorts of circumstances: I'll leave you to reflect on what personally makes you happy but for me: good food; good wine; a good book; a good film; a sunny day, swimming in an uncrowded pool. Happiness is rooted in what is happening at any given time. Take away the particular thing and we're left with the memory but not the reality. Joy is different: joy is not so much the present but the fact that at all times something is true for us: for example, I will always be my mother's son.

So what is always true for us as Christians? And that answers my second question. What is always true for us Paul goes on to explain in the rest of today's passage from Philippians.

Three things. The Lord is near. Don't worry – pray about everything. God's peace guards us.

We can rejoice because we are not alone. Jesus is not only our Lord and Saviour but he is our teacher and our friend. We are never alone – he is never far from us for he reassures at the end of Matthew's Gospel that he is with us always even until the end of time. What joy, in a lonely world, not to be alone.

We can rejoice because we don't need to worry. We need to pray instead, taking what worries us to God our Father in the name of God the Son encouraged by God the Holy Spirit. The joy of prayer is to know that whatever worries us, our real concerns are all of interest to God. Nothing is too small, nothing too trivial, nothing too bad or too gross. We can share all that bothers us with him confident in the knowledge that he knows us better than we know ourselves and he wants to hear what we have to say to him and he will uphold us.

We can rejoice because we can be at peace. The phrase Paul uses is the peace of God will guard your hearts and minds. Wonderful or what – in the midst of disquiet, chaos, panic, disorder that we can be at peace – an inner peace that can't be broken. It was the phrase 'the peace of God that passes all understanding' that nearly half a century ago made me personally want to take Christianity seriously as a way of life.

So on Gaudete Sunday, a day when we are being urged to rejoice, let me ask you the question, looking forward to Christmas, are you simply happy or are you full

of joy ? Joy is the second fruit of the spirit and as Christians, we can and should be joyful in the knowledge that we are not alone, that we can speak to God in prayer, and that his peace will guard our well-being.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

16th December, 2012

G: Sermon 27 : Rejoice

