

From The Pastor

‘Rejoice in the Lord always; let me say it again, rejoice! Your kindness should be known to all.’ These words belong to St. Paul in his letter to the Philippians, and begin to characterize the mood and message of the Third Sunday of Advent. Today is known as Gaudete Sunday, or Rejoice Sunday as we draw nearer to the commemoration of the birth of Jesus. The event of the Lord’s birth is so essential and significant that the mere mention of His birthday two-thousand years later should have us break into song and rejoicing.

More immediately, and before we get into the readings of the weekend, I want to thank all those who attended my Priesthood Dinner last Sunday. I rejoice in God’s call and the grace of my vocation. Grateful for the blessings and gifts the Lord has showered upon me, how could I not rejoice in God’s goodness? Further, I rejoice in all of you for your kindness to me. I was very edified and grateful that so many were interested in the event. It was a wonderful time, and a fine acknowledgment of the Year of the Priest. I am sorry we could not fit more people in the hall as there were many others who had expressed interest in attending. This was a fine event for us as parish to simply gather and celebrate our community life as people united in Christ.

Thank you to all of you who were kind enough to bring a card or gift. I was certainly not expecting such a response, but I am most grateful for your support and generosity. Thank you to Sue Gordon who first presented the idea, and to Steve Mall who once again managed the food and kitchen detail. We had several high school students who served and cleared tables, and did the dishes; thank you for your service. Many others worked on set up and food preparation. I am grateful to all who shared in making the day very pleasant. It serves as a great encouragement to go forward with God’s grace and your support.

Turning to the themes of the day, are we joyful in the Lord? Does our faith and trust in God, despite the trials of life, find us in a joyful peace in all God promises? This is part of the challenge of the weekend, isn’t it? How do those who are in serious need for health and home, or food or job feel the joy of the Lord? This is what is possible when faith is deeply rooted in our hearts. Each reading today reveals a different angle of joy and hope.

It is a risk of faith to call for joy in the midst of trial and suffering. Yet faith is most faith, most true when most needed. Deep faith is not needed when all is well and secure under our control. For the most part, Zephaniah was a prophet of judgment. Today, all we hear is hope and a call for joy and trust. A word of judgment is a conviction to wake up and live in the justice of God, not in sin. In today’s reading, the judgment of God is realized as mercy and forgiveness. ‘The Lord has removed the judgment against you. The Lord is in your midst. He will rejoice over you with gladness, and renew you in his love’. Listen to these words and hear them personally. Release yourself from inner judgment of guilt or failure. Silence the inner voice that may be saying God is displeased with you. Even though your life might, in your estimation, be a mess, it has not stopped God from loving you.

St. Paul’s context is different. Paul is in prison in Rome and is likely under a death sentence. Even with the threat of death and the injustice of imprisonment, Paul calls for rejoicing and is grateful for the faith and support of those around him. Paul is not waiting for his life circumstance to improve before he gets happy. Paul knows in his very bones the promise and mercy of Jesus. His trials did not dim his joy in the Lord.

The gospel is filled with power, curiosity, and practicality. What are people seeing and hearing in John that is evoking their response? People are touched by his message so deeply they want to act; ‘what are we to do’ they ask him. Notice who is asking; not only the Jews and those reverent of God, but also tax collectors and soldiers. The soldiers were Romans in occupation over the Jews, and the tax collectors were generally thieves who had money. This tells me that this was a miserable time in history. Even those considered in the ‘up’ position were miserable, looking for inner peace for their souls.

John speaks truth. Truth cuts to the heart even for those who seem to have power. John is also clear and practical. If you have two coats, share one. If you collect money for the government, don’t cheat people. If you are a soldier, don’t bully people or take advantage. These words reveal the justice of God that will be preached, lived, and fulfilled by Jesus.

So how do we get joyful? Act on what you hear, believe what you profess, and trust God’s love. Take the readings personally. In the first reading, the love and acceptance of God could not be more clear. That message is still true and effective today. If Paul can rejoice in joy under a death sentence, then we can hold fast to our faith even in the midst of our trials. Lastly, we can put into action the works of justice. Didn’t sharing your food at Thanksgiving with the needy make you feel good? Didn’t you feel good about buying a coat for a young person who would otherwise be cold? When we serve and share ourselves in love, regardless of our life setting, we will know the joy of the Lord. Give rebirth to the presence of Jesus within yourself by your good works. Joy will soon follow.

Father John Esper