

3rd Sunday of Advent (C)  
(Zephaniah 3:14-18 / Luke 3:10-18)  
13.12.2015  
Gaudete Sunday

Dear brothers and sisters,

Most of the time, when we go to Church, we hear in the liturgy, through the Word of God or the preacher, exhortations to rekindle our love for God and our love for our neighbours: we hear the call to be more faithful to prayer and Lectio Divina; the invitation to be more attentive to the basic needs of those with whom we live or those whom life places on our path. We find a good illustration of this last point in today's gospel when John the Baptist answers the question put to him by people: What must we do? John tells them to share what they have (clothing and food especially) with those who have nothing, because there is a solidarity between all human beings who were created by the same heavenly Father and who by consequence of this are brothers and sisters. These words are a clear invitation for us to practice works of mercy, an invitation which is not out of place at the beginning of this Holy Year of Mercy. God loves us. So, in return, we are called to love Him and to love our neighbour. This is good news because, in God's perspective, this is the way to true life

The liturgy of the third Sunday of Advent invites us not so much to love God and our neighbour, but **to rejoice**. Some might think that this is quite unusual, so much so that they may ask if this is right. Is it right for the liturgy to invite us to rejoice?

Can we really rejoice when so many people suffer from incurable illness and die, sometimes still young and leaving a family in complete disarray?

Can we really rejoice when so many people are unemployed and so are unable to look after the basic needs of their loved ones?

Can we really rejoice when so many people all over the world are victims of violence and wars of all kinds?

Can we really rejoice when so many people are obliged to flee their homeland and seek asylum elsewhere in a bid to protect their lives from death?

Can we really rejoice when so many people are victims of natural disasters?

Can we really rejoice when so many people are depressed, find life meaningless and are tempted by suicide?

Can we really rejoice when so many people have to bear heavy crosses which are often unknown, hidden from view to those around them? These hidden crosses may be past abuse, issues relating to sexual identity, addiction, threats of one kind or another...

Can we really rejoice when so many people are ashamed of past sins which were forgiven by God but which they can't forget...?

All that is true, and worthy of consideration and respect, and how much! But it remains that the liturgy is right to invite us to rejoice, even in the midst of all these trials. This is right, because the joy that the liturgy invites us to experience is not skin deep joy, a kind of happy clappy joy, a superficial, irresponsible or immature joy. On the contrary, the joy which we are invited to experience is the fruit of the coming of the Lord among us, his presence by our side. In the entrance antiphon to this Eucharist, we have sung two verses from the letter of St Paul to the Philippians:

”Rejoice in the Lord always (not when everything goes well, but always);  
again I say, rejoice.

Indeed, the Lord is near”. ‘The Lord is near’, this is the source of our joy. The source of our joy is the presence of the Lord by our side in all the situations of our lives.

It is this same joy that the prophet Zephaniah invited the people of Israel to experience in our first reading:

“Shout for joy, daughter of Zion,  
Israel, shout aloud!

Rejoice, exult with all your heart,  
daughter of Jerusalem...

**The Lord, the King of Israel, is in your midst;**

You have no more evil to fear...”

In the midst of all our trials, as we bear heavy crosses, we are called to rejoice because the Lord comes to be with us, to help us to live our lives, our difficult lives, which are often a participation in the passion of Christ.

The Lord is with us offering us a share in his victory over sin and death. He says to each one of us: all your sins confessed, whatever their size may be, are forgiven!

Death is not a meaningless end but a passage toward fullness of life, like a child leaving the womb and coming into the world!

The Lord is with us to nourish us day after day with the manna of his Word and his Eucharist!

The Lord is with us to help us carry our burdens: it is easier to carry a heavy burden with the help of someone else than to do it all alone!

The Lord is with us as a friend, an intimate presence, who comes to deliver us from the deadly feeling of loneliness!

Thank you, Lord, for coming to visit us very soon. Do not delay, come!

What is amazing is that, according to the prophet Zephaniah, the Lord’s coming among us will fill with joy not only our own hearts, but also the Lord’s heart. I quote:

“The Lord your God is in your midst,  
a victorious warrior.

He will exult with joy over you,

He will renew you by his love;

He will dance with shouts of joy for you  
as on a day of festival”.

The coming of the Lord among us at Christmas, the mystery of the incarnation of the Son of God is all about joy, joy in our hearts and joy in the Lord’s heart.

This last point tells us a lot about God. Our God is not a distant and remote God, a God without heart, feeling and emotions. Our God is a God who is near to us, a God who is with us – Emmanuel –, a God who rejoices with us and who suffers with us, a compassionate God, a merciful God. Come, Lord Jesus, and fill our hearts with joy, with true joy, with your joy. Amen.