

3rd Sunday of Advent (C)
(Zephaniah 3:14-18 / Luke 3:10-18)
16.12.2018
Gaudete

Dear brothers and sisters,

Today, the liturgy of the Church invites us to rejoice. We sang in the Entrance Antiphon of today's Eucharist: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice. Indeed, the Lord is near".

I guess some of you may be thinking: "Please, Father, come back to planet earth! Stop dreaming! Open your eyes! You invite us to rejoice: but..."

Do you not see what a political mess we are in, not only here in Northern Ireland or in Great Britain, but also in so many countries around the world?

Do you ignore that today so many Christian brothers and sisters are being persecuted for their faith in Christ – many of them obliged to flee their homelands? Then, when they seek asylum in our European countries, they find that people do not want to welcome them.

Have you not heard about all those who are terminally ill, a lot of those dying still young people? Do you forget what is happening in the NHS where the waiting lists are lengthening beyond imagination?

Do you not know that there are a lot of people who are desperately looking for a job and because of their present unemployment are not able to look after the basic needs of their loved ones, especially at this Christmas Season?

Have you never heard of all those precious human relationships which are broken: marriage breakdowns, relatives or friends who don't speak to one another and look the other way when they meet?

Yes, we repeat our question: is the Church's liturgy realistic when it invites us to rejoice? Is the invitation to rejoice not completely senseless? Is it not something of a joke?"

No, dear brothers and sisters, the call to rejoice in every circumstance is not a joke! The liturgy is right to invite us to rejoice always. Let us listen once more to the first reading from the prophet Zephaniah that we have just heard:

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

Rejoice, exult with all your heart,
daughter of Jerusalem!"

Why such an invitation to rejoice? Because

"The Lord, the king of Israel, is in your midst;
You have no more evil to fear".

And again:

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

The liturgy is right to invite us to rejoice because the Lord God is coming to be with us. Indeed, He is already with us; He helps us carry the burdens of our lives. We are no longer alone in our difficulties. The Lord is with us, to give us a hand. It is easier to bear a burden when we are two than to do so when we are alone. The Lord does not completely lift the burdens from our

shoulders, or remove the obstacles from our path, because He respects our freedom. But, if we open our hearts to his presence, he helps us to carry our load with the promise that, at the end, he will give to us a share in his victory. The Lord's presence by our side is a compassionate presence, a healing and pacifying presence, an eternal presence which will last even beyond death. The Lord is with us, in the mess of our lives. We are no longer alone. This is the good news of Christmas, the source of our joy, not an unrealistic joy but a joy incarnated in the messy reality of our lives.

Not only are we invited to rejoice because of the presence of the Lord by our side, but to remember that the Lord himself rejoices over us. The Lord does not look at us from a distance, looking down on us from on high. He is with us. If we rejoice of his presence, he rejoices over our joy; he rejoices in our being present to Him. We cannot but think of this verse of Isaiah:

“Like a young man marrying a virgin,
your builder will wed you,
And as the bridegroom rejoices in his bride,
So will your God rejoice in you”. (Is 62:5)

God did not save us from a remote distance, from his place in heaven. He took flesh in order to be one of us, in order to enter into a relationship with us. If we rejoice in the Lord, the Lord rejoices over us. Our joy is the source of God' joy.

In today's gospel passage, the people, to whom John was announcing the coming of the Lord and the need of conversion in order to be made ready to welcome him, were asking: “What must we do?” The question comes back three times in the few verses we read. In answer, John the Baptist invites them to live a fraternal life, a life of justice, a life of right relationships with one another. He exhorts them to share what they have with those in need, to be honest when they deal with others with money and to be respectful of those to whom they relate: there is to be no intimidation, no extortion. There is no need for them to renounce being a tax collector or a soldier; they don't have to give up their job; they have just to accomplish their tasks in merciful, honest and respectful ways.

These counsels are still relevant for us today. To share what we have with those in need, to be honest when we deal with money, to be respectful in the way we treat others. Let us recognize that we all have a lot to do in regard to all these matters. To share what we have and not to keep it for ourselves alone is not always evident for us. To be honest when we deal with money is not always just so easy. We have never to forget that the purpose of money is to circulate wealth and not to hold on to it for ourselves alone in a greedy way. To be respectful of every human being, from the womb to the tomb, this too can be quite a challenge.

Paradoxically, if we walk on this path, if we behave in regard to others as Christ behaves in our regard, we shall experience happiness, true happiness, the true happiness of Christmas that nothing and nobody can take away from us.