

3rd Sunday of Advent (A)
(Isaiah 35:1-6.10 / Matthew 11:2-11)
11.12.2016
We are great!

Today why would we be joyful? What can we make of the reading of the prophet Isaiah and its call to exult and rejoice? Is St Paul completely out of touch with reality when he urges us to “rejoice always” (1Th 5:16)?

If we look around us, there are some good reasons for us to rejoice. Work, family and church may be places where we experience real joy. The simple fact that we breathe, walk, speak and just live in a country now free of terrorist violence is – should be – a source of rejoicing.

However we all know that all these positive things are fragile. We have seen and sometimes experienced how life can be a roller-coaster. Good health and relationships, financial security and political stability can be challenged, shaken and lost in the blink of an eye. Anything at any time can rob us of our joy of simply being alive.

Even when nothing catastrophic happens, even when life is going smoothly and quite uneventfully, as human beings, there is something within us which makes us long for a deeper joy than the one we can get from money, power, sex, stability and security. We all long for a joy that no one can take from us (cf. Jn 16:22). While all that is human and from this world, every achievement and relationship can be used by God to warm our hearts, to cheer us up and to help us continue the journey with renewed dynamism, we know that we need to find a solid foundation to our joy.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus makes a statement which has puzzled most of the commentators: “Of all the children born of women, a greater than John the Baptist has never been seen; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he is.” For Jesus, in the history of humanity, John the Baptist appears to be the summit, he is the greatest of all men and women.

Yet with the birth of Jesus, the smallest in the kingdom is greater than John the Baptist. The obvious and amazing conclusion we can draw from this statement is that, if we are in Christ who is the kingdom in us, we are all greater than John the Baptist.

By his incarnation, Jesus plants within our human flesh a seed which is the assurance of our present greatness. Yes we are great and herein lies the root, the solid foundation, of our joy. As beloved sons and daughters of God, as brothers and sisters of Christ, we are of royal stock, God’s temple (cf. 1Co 3:16), lights for the world (cf. Mt 5:14).

In our Churches, sometimes we are quick to judge and to condemn. We are prompt to accuse ourselves and others rather than to encourage and praise one another. We have been formed to discern and uproot our sins more than to discern and give thanks for our gifts and for the gifts of others.

It is clear that we are called to repent and to recognise our sins and weakness, we have to be humble and to think of ourselves as the least in the kingdom of heaven. Yet we must remember that, according to Jesus, the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John the Baptist who was the greatest of all men and women. So there is something great within us. In you and me, in God’s sight, there is something extremely precious and invaluable. Herein lies our deepest joy, a joy that nothing and nobody can take away from us.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer believed that “the joy of God is invincible and irrefutable because it has been through the poverty of the crib and the distress of the cross; it looks death in the face, yet finds life in death itself” (quoted in *The Narrow Path*, p. 54). So we believe that with this joy within us, we can face all things, we are able to see that there is a deeper reality to all things.

This is what happens at Christmas, this is what we are supposed to experience in the coming days. In the Child Jesus, born in a messy and dirty stable, greatness is hidden in smallness, strength in vulnerability, belonging in rejection, divinity in humanity.

And all this is “good news of great joy” (Lk 2:10) because this is true for each one of us. In Bethlehem, God sows greatness in our smallness, strength in our vulnerability, belonging in our feelings of rejection, holiness in our sinfulness, divinity in our humanity.

Our joy to be endowed with such a generous and amazing gift is increased by the knowledge that it is shared by all. In no way can we enjoy our greatness on our own, in an individualistic way. In the body that we form if one is honoured, all rejoice, if one is not respected, all are hurt.

None of us is enhanced in dignity and greatness to the detriment of somebody else. We are responsible for one another and for one another’s growth in God’s image and likeness. This responsibility is – should be – a source of joy.

We are preparing ourselves for great rejoicing at Christmas, and it is good. However may we find our joy, not first in what we possess or buy, but in a renewed awareness of who we are.

In the coming days, as we prepare our eyes to see God in the Child in the manger, may we learn to look at ourselves and at one another in the way God looks at us, with immense respect and joyful amazement because, as St Gregory of Nyssa writes, we “alone have been made the image of the Reality that transcends all understanding, the likeness of imperishable beauty, the imprint of true divinity, the recipient of beatitude, the seal of true light (...). There is nothing so great among beings that it can be compared with our greatness” (quoted in *The Roots...*, p. 79).