

Homily for the Third Sunday of Advent (Year C)

Today, the third Sunday of Advent, is known as 'Gaudete' Sunday from the first word of the entrance antiphon, which is in turn the first verse of the second reading 'Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice'. This is rather lost in our mundane translation where it is turned into 'I want you to be happy, always happy in the Lord'. This third Sunday is full of a sense of joy and rejoicing - the words joy and rejoicing appear once in the Opening Prayer, four times in the first reading, twice in the psalm and twice more in the second reading. Here, in the middle of Advent, we are clearly meant to think about joy. Clearly there is an element of anticipation about this: the birth of the Saviour is close. But this seems a good opportunity to think about joy more generally. What is it, and where does it come from? Most important of all, how can we find it and keep hold of it?

Obviously joy, which is one of the fruits of the Spirit, is much more than happiness or pleasure. It is something that goes deeper than either of those, something that is less easily disturbed than either of those. Whereas happiness and pleasure depend on circumstances, on the kind of day I am having, joy is more like a fundamental attitude, a key to the way I live, something that affects everything I do or say. I was thinking about this while we were in Rome this week watching the Pope drive past to lead the devotions for the Immaculate Conception. Those people who portray him as some sort of stern and hardline disciplinarian have clearly never seen him, because every time I have seen him his face has been full of joy, the kind of joy that lifts peoples spirits and makes them glad to be there, glad to be alive. What can be the source of such joy?

I would like to suggest to you an image of human life which is very familiar, but which gives us some insight into the real meaning of Christian joy. We are very at home with the idea that our lives are a kind of a journey; that in any lifetime there is a sense of progress and movement. We leave behind the places that we once were, the people that we once were, and we move onwards. But we are seldom able to take this image much further. What was the starting point of this journey? What will be its destination? I would like to suggest to you that joy finds its roots in the serene and peaceful knowledge of where I have come from, who I am journeying with, and where I am heading.

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It is impossible to plan a journey unless you know where you are starting from. If I am travelling somewhere and I get lost, it is not because I have lost my destination, it is because I do not know where I am. I cannot recalculate my route, because I do not know the starting point of my new route. If we do not know where we are starting from, we are lost. If we are lost there is no serenity, and so there can be no joy. The starting point for Christian joy is a deep certainty of the place from which I am setting out. In one sense, of course, my starting point is my country of birth, and my family, and that is why people feel such a sense of attachment to their birthplaces, and such a need to know more about their families, more about their parents, more about the communities from which they spring. But for us, as followers of Jesus Christ whose lives of faith began at the font, it is also essential for us to know and understand the Church which is our origin, the faith which is our home. Once again, I was very conscious of this in Rome last week, and this is one of the reasons that I like to travel to Rome. It is not just for the buildings, and the paintings and the food; it is also because when I am at the centre of the Christian world, I refresh and renew my knowledge of who I really am. That is the place of martyrdom of Peter and Paul; that is the place from which Augustine set out to bring the gospel to this country; that has been the magnet that has drawn holy men and women for two thousand years, and on every street corner there is some reminder of the central truths of human existence. I come back to England, where such truth has tended to become hidden or diluted with a renewed sense of where I am coming from.

My faith journey began at the font, and I can never have any hope of finding joy unless I understand and take to heart the place from which I am setting out. Joy depends on knowing, loving and treasuring the Church and the faith which it proclaims. If we want to be joyful people we have to begin here. We have to start from a commitment to learn more about our faith, trying to understand it more. We have to begin from a conscious choice that we wish to be closer to the heart of the Church. Of course, there is much about the Church that is not perfect, there is much that could be made better; but we have to be able to distinguish from the faults and failures of the people who make up the Church, and the beautiful truths of the Christian faith. Sometimes our confidence takes a knock when we hear people criticising the Church; we are not sure quite how to answer them, and doubts begin to set in. That is the time to set about learning more, understanding more. I do not recognise a Christianity that is negative, depressing restrictive and joyless.

The first step on the path to joy is to understand more fully the place from which we begin, to know and love our faith, and the Church which proclaims it, better. The second step is to take to heart who it is that travels with us. On every step of our journey we are accompanied by the risen Jesus. We are deeply, profoundly, absolutely and unconditionally loved by Him, and he is always beside us. Zephaniah and the psalmist tell the people to rejoice because the Lord is in their midst; Paul tells the Philippians to rejoice because the Lord is very near. There is no doubt that essential to Christian joy is faith and trust that Christ walks beside us, and that he loves us.

Finally, joy depends on a trusting acceptance of where we are heading. We might know where we began, and with whom we are travelling, but unless we are sure of where we are going joy will elude us, and be replaced by uncertainty. For that reason we must be very clear that God plans for us to spend eternity with him; his plan is that the end of our journey will be 'like plunging into the ocean of infinite love, a moment in which time - the before and after - no longer exists' (Benedict XVI *Spe Salvi* n. 12).

Advent invites us to a renewed sense of joy, because without joy there can be no true witness to Christ. I read a wonderful interview given by Archbishop Dolan this year at the time of his appointment as Archbishop of New York, in which he said this:

"Being Catholic is not a heavy burden, snuffing the joy out of life; rather our faith in Jesus and His Church gives meaning, purpose and joy to life. I love being a Catholic, I love being a priest, and I fully intend to love being archbishop of New York while loving all of you in the Church in New York."

That, of course, is it. If we feel little or no joy in our faith, the problem lies with us. It means we have lost contact with those things that really matter, and been seduced by things of lesser value. We need to readjust our priorities in life, to go to confession and leave behind the old self. We need to reassert once again our confidence in where we have come from, in who we are travelling with, and in where we are heading.