

## **THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT:      December 15, 2024**

There is a theme running through the Word of God today and I am sure you picked it up. We are told, rather insistently, that we should be joyful.

First, we read the prophet Zephaniah, written in the seventh century before Christ. The first two chapters of this prophet were primarily a condemnation over the moral decline of Judah. Warnings of the ominous “day of the Lord” foretold destruction and punishment. But this chapter has a dramatic reversal of the dark mood, rejoicing in an ode to joy. “Sing aloud; shout O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart. The King of Israel is in your midst. Do not fear. The Lord will renew you in his love. The Lord, your God, will exult over you with loud singing....”

Secondly, we have the apostle Paul, now in a house imprisonment in Rome, possibly facing his death. He writes to his beloved Philippians in a mood of rejoicing, affection and encouragement. The Lord is near, Paul writes, and implies that rejoicing is appropriate, no matter what the circumstance. Can you put yourselves in the shoes of the Philippians, no matter what the circumstance of your own life might be? “Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say: Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” It is Paul’s faith and confidence that fills him with joy. What a joy it is to pray this with conviction!

In the gospel, John the Baptist is not exactly a party man. His joy is that of repentance. He is strong in calling people to repent, and the crowds come out to hear him. But he is quite gentle with those seekers, such soldiers and tax collectors, who seek ways for themselves to repent. He must have been a very impressionable speaker for many think he must be the Messiah. John rather points to someone that is coming who is more powerful than he, who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. John, in today’s final line of the gospel, proclaimed the good news to the people. In this way he spread joy.

These are the three scripture readings for today which shout, sing, dance joy. Do you have this joy? When you are feeling down, does it really help for someone to come along and say, “Cheer up”? What if you don’t feel like it? What if you feel besieged, overworked, overwrought, tired, grieving, cramped, and alone? Do you

think that one of the bystanders at the crucifixion looked up and asked, “Are you happy up there, Jesus?”

Pope Francis has preached joy since he became Pope. His first encyclical was titled, “Joy of the Gospel”. He has said that the most convincing way to spread Jesus and the gospel was to show that you are a joyful Christian. A Bishop, in times past said that joy is the most infallible sign of God in your lives.

So we have to look deeper to find joy in our lives, even in the midst of difficulties. This joy is not a “feeling good” joy. It is not like a drink that makes us happy. It requires work to detach ourselves from whatever is holding us back from meeting our Lord. Why did Saint Paul urge us to have joy? Because “the Lord is near”. Do we realize that the Lord is near? Do we have the conviction and the certitude that we are not alone, that we are loved, that our lives and all we do to love others has meaning? That no one’s life, long or short, rich or poor, lacks meaning.

Advent is such a rich time because we are encouraged to shout out, “Come, Lord Jesus, come! We are desperate for your presence.” We listen to the poetry of the prophet, Isaiah, who assured the people that God was with them in exile, even as God was later with Jesus on the cross. We heed the call of John the Baptist to look to the Lamb of God who became one of us to be with in good times and bad.

And in the finality of Advent we turn to Mother of God, Mary, Her message on this past week’s feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, told the poor, oppressed people that she was their mother, she was with them, that they should not fear.

The coming feast of Christmas is not just a reminder of this special birth 2000 years ago but is the assurance that this baby will grow, as a fellow human being, to accompany us in all that is human and be with us on our way. We will sing Joy to the world, not just as a memory of this great birth but as the assurance that God keeps the divine promises and is near to us now.

Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say rejoice. The Lord is near.

**Timothy J. Joyce, S.T.L., O.S.B.**