

Holy Covenant – Third Sunday of Advent – 14 December 2014

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Isaiah 61. 1-4, 8-11; Ps 126; 1 Thessalonians 5. 12-28; John 1. 6-8, 19-28

Traditionally in the Western Church, this third Sunday in Advent is called Gaudete Sunday. Its name comes from the Latin word 'Gaudete', meaning 'Rejoice', which opens the introit to the Latin Mass for this day: 'Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say rejoice'. The overarching theme of the Advent season, of course, is one of expectation and preparation for the feast of Christmas, for the coming of Christ – and this includes a strong penitential element. 'Make the straight the way of the Lord'. On Gaudete Sunday, however, the penitential exercises of the season are suspended in order to symbolise the joy and gladness of this promised coming – and that's why our Advent candle today is traditionally pink, and why in more Catholic circles the clergy wear rose-coloured vestments. There's a lightening of the sombre, purple mood, a foretaste of the rejoicing to come.

In its own way, though, the invitation to rejoice, to be joyful, can be just as challenging as the invitation to repent. In fact, in our culture, in our lives, I wonder if it isn't the *more* difficult of the two? There seem so many reasons not to rejoice – ranging from the often overwhelmed, stressful, painful, frightening, sorrowful experience of our own lives to the tragic reality of a world seemingly endlessly immured in conflict, corruption, disease and environmental disaster. St Paul's exhortation to 'rejoice always' and 'in everything give thanks' seems, in these contexts, to be impossible if not flat-out callous and irresponsible.

And yet, over these last few months, I have found myself increasingly drawn to explore the theme of joy. I sense that it matters – for me personally – but also for us as a faith community, to take more seriously than we do, this exhortation to be joyful and to dare to believe that our vocation is *enjoy* and not simply to survive our lives. And this is not just because it's a more pleasant way to live, but because joy is the sign, it is the experience of being in Christ. The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche

observed its absence, saying that if Christians wanted him to believe in their Redeemer, they would need to look a little more redeemed. Our joy glorifies God, because it makes visible the nature of God as joyous, one who induces joy.

But how? How do we obey this call, this imperative of rejoicing in a way which is not simply confined to singing about it in church? I don't believe there is a formula for this, but as we open up the question, I want to suggest a few important touchstones.

First of all, the experience of joy doesn't seem to be something we can manufacture or make happen. It arrives as a gift – and often after or in the process of a very painful season, a 'dark night'. I think of those I have known who have emerged from deep depression into a totally unexpected experience of joy and delight. In the Christmas story, joy erupts (so the angels say) upon shepherds going about their nightly watch, like light shining suddenly in the darkness, and C.S. Lewis famously wrote of being 'surprised by joy'.

It seems also to be an experience that has a qualitatively different dimension from pleasure or even happiness. Part of the difference is that joy is at some level independent of circumstance, not *determined* by how things are going. It doesn't wait for everything and everyone to be fixed, and it doesn't depend on us ignoring or being blind to painful realities. St Paul exhorted the early churches to rejoice even in the midst of persecution, and while his own suffering continued. It's easy to let these apostolic words wash over us without paying much attention – either we think 'it was (somehow) different for them', or there's some pious hyperbole involved. But as Laurence Freeman pointed out recently, despite the difficulties, setbacks and dangers of his life, Paul never lost his joy in ministry. And I wonder, what would it mean for us to take that seriously in our daily lives – really to open our hearts and minds to the promise that our experience of discipleship is supposed to be one of 'joy', whatever the circumstances we find ourselves?

We seem, then, to have arrived at a bit of a paradox. On the one hand, joy is said to be a 'gift', not something we manufacture or make happen. And on the other

hand, joy is an imperative – ‘rejoice always’, ‘be joyful’. And as I ponder this seeming contradiction, I wonder if the invitation is somehow to open ourselves to the possibility of receiving the gift, to put ourselves in the way of ‘joy’, daring to desire it, daring to look for it.

If you’re like me, you might have to work at not resisting this invitation. It feels a bit like courting disappointment – expecting too much, tempting fate, or else totally incongruent with the reality facing me and so – especially when we are suffering grief or illness or profound frustration – just cruel. What *could* rejoicing mean for me now? And at the same time, it feels almost self-indulgent and selfish – a luxury in a world of so much need. But, that’s the thing. More and more I am convinced that it isn’t a luxury – and we, our church and our world are dying for want of it. The refusal of joy is the refusal of God, whose presence provokes rejoicing. When we live as ‘kill-joys’ (and isn’t that an illuminating phrase?) – we tend to be living earnest, utilitarian, dour kinds of lives, quenching the Spirit, shutting down freedom and laughter and vitality, all of which, paradoxically, it is possible to know even in times of grief and suffering.

So, how do we put ourselves in the way of joy? How do we open ourselves to participate in God’s joyous life, even in the tough times? Our tradition suggests there is a profound connection between joy and humility or what Jesus called poverty of spirit. We see this connection in the life of Mary and in the life of that most overtly joyful of the saints, St Francis of Assisi. And in them, we begin to recognise what poverty of spirit really is – not some kind of complicated self-denial or self-suppression, but simple, undefended availability to God.

In our lives we often find ourselves in this place in the wake of experiences of failure, exhaustion or despair – which may help us to see the connection between the gift of joy and the dark night. And this is because, often enough, it is only through these experiences of unravelling that we are able finally to let go our efforts to make ourselves right, or to manage life on our terms, even when these are the most well-intentioned and religiously commended terms. True poverty of spirit is a place of

profound emptiness and vulnerability, a place of listening and waiting arrived at when everything else has been burned away.

The prayer of the heart leads us to this same place (remember St Paul says to pray in this way, 'without ceasing'), because in this prayer we are allowing the prayer of Christ to come alive in us, turned with him and without remainder or safety net to God, receiving our lives from his hands. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that when we follow Jesus, we do not know where we will be led, but we know it will be a path of joy. So discipleship, obedience, poverty of spirit, joy – these belong together, because joy is what happens in us as we receive from God the fullness of God. And then, there are practices of reception and these, I think, keep us connected to the gift as it is given – practices of gratitude, celebration, enjoyment. We let ourselves receive the gift, acknowledging, wondering, attending to its shaping of our responses and ourselves.

All this suggests a different sense for us of Gaudete Sunday. The invitation to rejoice is not just light relief in the midst of the otherwise serious, spiritual business of preparing for Christmas, but is itself an integral part of what it means to be open to the reality of God coming among us, dwelling within us. It is part of how we 'make straight the way'. And so it shows us something too about our vocation as disciples in what poet Jack Gilbert has called 'the ruthless furnace of this world'. We are to be joyful, not in the sense of the relentless, plastic positivity of television evangelists, but with the delighted carefree abandon of those who are allowing themselves to be drawn into deeper enjoyment of God, through whom, in whom and with whom we accept our invitation to join in the rejoicing that enlivens and heals the world.