

Sunday, December 15, 2024
The Third Sunday Of Advent (Gaudete)

Festal Eucharist
11:00 am

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Canon Carl Turner

on
Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

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God visits us in his socks.

In today's passage from that the closing passage of that same Epistle, Paul urges the Church at Philippi to rejoice. That word 'rejoice' gives us the name for this third Sunday in Advent – *Gaudete Sunday* – characterized by rose pink vestments and altar hangings – "*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.*" Words that are used in the traditional introit for this Sunday.

Gaudete – Rejoice!

That rejoicing is a foretaste of the Christmas feast and appears in a 16th century collection of Christmas hymns and songs titled *Piae Cantiones*. It is one of the most famous Christmas carols – *Gaudete, gaudete! Christus est natus ex Maria Virgine, Gaudete!* Rejoice, rejoice! Christ is born of the Virgin Mary, rejoice!

This week, the mood of Advent changes. We have spent the first part of Advent thinking about Christ's second coming as judge and the ushering in of the Kingdom of God. Now we move more urgently into remembering Christ's first coming among us in Bethlehem. The Magnificat used at Evening Prayer will have special Advent Antiphons – known as the 'Great O Antiphons' because each begins with the vocative 'O.'

Last week I reminded us of the Advent theme found at the heart of the Lord's Prayer – *Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven*. To respond to that prayer requires a qualitative change in our lives and that also has a special word – *repentance*. It is the message of John the Baptist that we heard in our Gospel reading today; a message that does not seem to sit easily with Christmas festivities and rejoicing. In fact, John's message is hardly cheerful; can you imagine if I greeted you at the beginning of mass like John the Baptist? "*You brood of vipers!*" Luckily for you, you are sitting in an Episcopal Church today!

But, because we are shocked by John's insulting of the crowds, it is easy to miss the words that come immediately after: "*Bear fruits worthy of repentance.*" True repentance means that qualitative change in our lives – in our thoughts, our words, our actions. True repentance is about being changed and becoming more like Jesus Christ. The word itself means "to turn around." The people who came to John were hypocrites who saw their status with the law and the prophets as enough to make them better than others. John said to them, "*Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our*

ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham." As we hear that, we should recall the words of the Lord in John's Gospel when those very same pharisees tried to put Jesus down. Jesus said to the Pharisees, "Your ancestor Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day; he saw it and was glad." Then they said to him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?" Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am." And what was their response? They took up stones to kill Jesus.

Interestingly, it is the crowds of ordinary folk, the tax collectors, and the soldiers and not the pharisees and scribes who responded to John the Baptists' message by asking what they should do in order to bear fruits worthy of repentance. John gives them simple and practical advice: To the crowd he urged them to be compassionate and charitable; to the tax collector, to be truthful and fair; to the soldier, not to bully or practice extortion. In other words, the fruits of repentance are seen in our relationships with others and the way that we put our faith into practice.

Repentance in the economy of God's salvation is not to be confused with human ideas of criminal justice. I grew up with some odd ideas about forgiveness. Nevertheless, I was taught that it was important to forgive – that it was a Christian virtue. Unfortunately, I all too often heard this phrase when I was growing up – "I may forgive, but I will not forget," which always puzzled me. Now, it can be hard to forgive someone who has really, really hurt you. In fact, I think it is okay not to trust someone who has hurt you or defrauded you or abused you – very few of us would find it easy to befriend such a person, even when they are truly remorseful for what they have done – but the power of repentance in the Kingdom of God is revolutionary. God's forgiveness is absolute and moves beyond the hurt that human beings experience because it was formed in the crucible of God's love – fashioned from the broken heart of Jesus on the Cross; from the blood and the water that flowed from his pierced side. Jesus stretched out his arms to embrace the world and uttered words that would transfigure our mean understanding of repentance and forgiveness – "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

This means that the Church, as a community of faith, should be characterized by repentance and should be recognized by fruits of repentance – making a difference in the lives of others. Archbishop Oscar Romero puts it very simply. Preaching in Advent in 1977, he said this: "A religion of Sunday Mass but of unjust weeks does not please the Lord. A religion of much praying but with hypocrisy in the heart is not Christian. A Church that sets itself up only to be well off, to have a lot of money and comfort, but that forgets to protest injustices, would not be the true Church of our divine redeemer."^[1]

Last week, I was very moved by the way our volunteers involved in *Neighbor to Neighbor* were speaking with those who had come for food. Two young asylum seekers came and I tried to chat with them – their struggled with English, but we had a volunteer who spoke Mandarin. I was horrified to discover that these two young men did not own a coat, or a hat, or gloves and it was so cold outside. We were able to provide some for them; in other words, *Neighbor to Neighbor* fulfilled the exhortation of John the Baptist that we heard today – "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise."

Now we realize why repentance and rejoicing – Gaudete – are actually very well connected. Let's go back to the Gospel reading. After many more exhortations and talk of the Messiah who would baptize not with water but with fire, Luke tells us that John proclaimed the Good News to his people. Yes, my friends, **repentance is good news** – and, as Fr. Gioia reminded us at evensong last Sunday, the Greek word for good news is translated as *Gospel*. To respond to the Gospel is to repent, and to repent is to live a joyful life.

Do you remember when the Lord when he taught about repentance and forgiveness himself: Luke tells us that those very same people who came to John the Baptist – the tax collectors and sinners – came to listen to Jesus and the Pharisees and Scribes continued to grumbled about it. I guess they were living out that idea “I may forgive but I will not forget” to which Jesus responded with the parable of the lost sheep which ends with these words: “*Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.*’ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.’ (Luke 15:6b-7) Just like John the Baptist, Jesus challenges us today to discover him in unexpected ways.

Rejoice! Gaudete!

Let’s let the 11th Rector have the last word:

God has the habit of visiting us in his socks – without shoes, so to speak. He never gives us time to put our faces right to greet him, or smooth our hair, or hide our untidinesses under the sofa cushion. There never is the best time for us to meet him, and he is always different from the way we picture him to be. In a line waiting for food, not at an appearance for an Oscar award evening. Among the dispossessed and fearful, not making a triumphant arrival in a tuxedo. ^[2]

References

- 1 Sermon preached on December 4, 1977
 - 2 From ‘Nothing Cheap and Much that Cheerful’
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