

This Sunday has come to be known as “Gaudete Sunday”. Rejoice, be glad!

In the middle of what the penitential season of Advent, when the atmosphere was deliberately sombre and penitential, we are reminded of the joy and brightness of what is to come. – the very joyful occasion of the birth of Jesus. Because we are soon to remember that the Son of God, Jesus the Christ, came to live among us as a human being and be one of us. “And the Word [who has the nature of God] became a human being and lived [literally ‘pitched his tent’] among us” (John 1:14).

Do you sense the joy in today’s readings?

*“I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,  
my whole being shall exult in my God”* Isaiah

*“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances;  
for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit”*  
St Paul

*“I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness”* John the Baptist

Israel radiates as a joyful bride coming to her bridegroom adorned for a lavish, oriental wedding. Paul’s words to the Thessalonians continue the theme of hope and joy in a community that lives by the life of Christ. And St John, in the gospel, pictures the work of John the Baptist, who came to witness to God’s light upon this earth. This is not a joyousness without responsibility. It’s a joy that is found when people find and carry out their true mission in life. Isaiah speaks of one anointed and sent to bring good news to the oppressed – words that were adopted by Jesus to describe his own life’s purpose – just as they should also be made real in the life of every Christian. Those privileged to share in Jesus’ spiritual life must also share in his concerns and desires – that is the spiritual joy of bearing our share of the Christian work-load, to do our bit, in our time, to realise the goals of Jesus in our world.

In this morning’s gospel John declares himself to be the voice crying in the wilderness; he is not the Word, only the voice; he is not the light, only the witness to the light. John did what he was doing to open people’s eyes to

the person standing among them, to the Messiah who was in their midst without their realizing it. There was a great light shining among them that many were unaware of, and John had come to bear witness to that light. John did what he did because of who he was.

‘Who are you?’, is a question we can answer at many different levels. We can simply give our name, or give our parents’ names; we can answer it by giving our professional qualifications, or by naming the role or the position we have in life. Yet, the deepest level, the most fundamental level, at which we can answer that question is the spiritual level. Who am I at that deepest, most spiritual, level of my being? Who am I before God? Who is God calling me to be? The truth is that even though we are all far from perfect, we are, nonetheless, called to be a witness to Christ.

Who we are as witnesses to the light, as the voice for the Word, shapes how we live and explains why we live the way we do. The answer to the question, ‘Who are you?’ grounds the answer to the question, ‘Why do you do what you are doing?’ Advent is a good time to reclaim our fundamental identity, our Christ-linked identity. If Jesus is to be born anywhere today, it will be in the hearts of his followers.

*He was sent “to bring good news to the poor, to bind up hearts that are broken; to proclaim liberty to captives, freedom to those in prison; to proclaim a year of grace from the Lord.”*

Even for those of us who live in lands of abundance and prosperity, there are other forms of poverty (social, emotional, intellectual, spiritual); other forms of captivity (compulsions, obsessions, addictions, trapped in consumerism...); the blindness and deafness of those who can see no real life meaning in all of the plenty they pursue; the dumbness of those who have nothing constructive or creative to say; the lameness of those who are socially and emotionally crippled and the leprosy of isolation and loneliness in the midst of the crowds.

If the Lord has really come to liberate us from all of this, then we surely have cause to rejoice.

*“I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,  
my whole being shall exult in my God”* Isaiah

As we prepare to celebrate Christmas and the coming of God into our lives through Jesus we need also to remind ourselves that we have been called to be the means to bring Jesus into other people's lives. John did not come to announce the beginning of the Christmas sale season. He did not come to stir us into a frenzy of shopping and spending. He came to remind us and to bear witness to all who will listen that the darkest forces of the world are not as powerful as they claim or appear to be.

As Terry Pratchett has it in his book *Reaper Man*:

*“Light thinks it travels faster than anything else, but it is wrong. No matter how fast light travels, it finds the darkness has always got there first, and is waiting for it.”*

Our joy must be to reveal the life of Christ anew in the world – a world that increasingly is desperate to see and know the Light which is *“the life, and the life was the light of all people.”*

C S Lewis spoke often joy. Indeed, he called his autobiography *Surprised By Joy*. He wrote about joy and happiness throughout his life, and even the essay he was writing when he died was called *“We Have No ‘Right To Happiness’”*. It was later published in *God in the Dock*.

Another essay, also found in *God in the Dock*, is entitled *“Answers to Questions on Christianity”*. Question 11 asks this: *“Which of the religions of the world gives to its followers the greatest happiness?”* To this he gave this now famous reply:

*“While it lasts, the religion of worshipping oneself is the best. I have an elderly acquaintance of about eighty, who has lived a life of unbroken selfishness and self-admiration from the earliest years, and is, more or less, I regret to say, one of the happiest men I know. From the moral point of view it is very difficult! I am not approaching the question from that angle. As you perhaps know, I haven't always been a Christian. I didn't go to religion to make me happy. I always knew a bottle of Port would do that. If you want a religion to make you feel really comfortable, I certainly don't recommend Christianity.”*

But perhaps some of his most-well known comments about happiness come from his classic *Mere Christianity*. As he says there: *“The moment you have a self at all, there is a possibility of putting yourself first—wanting to be the centre—wanting to be God, in fact. That was the sin of Satan: and that was the sin he taught the human race.*

*“What Satan put into the heads of our remote ancestors was the idea that they could ‘be like gods’ – could set up on their own as if they had created themselves – be their own masters – invent some sort of happiness for themselves outside God, apart from God. And out of that hopeless attempt has come nearly all that we call human history – money, poverty, ambition, war, prostitution, classes, empires, slavery – the long terrible story of man trying to find something other than God which will make him happy.*

*“The reason why it can never succeed is this. God made us: invented us as a man invents an engine. A car is made to run on petrol, and it would not run properly on anything else. Now God designed the human machine to run on Himself. He Himself is the fuel our spirits were designed to burn, or the food our spirits were designed to feed on. There is no other. That is why it is just no good asking God to make us happy in our own way without bothering about religion. God cannot give us a happiness and peace apart from Himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing.”*

And the very last paragraph of his book says this: *“Give up yourself and you will find your real self. Lose your life and you will save it. Submit to death, death of your ambitions and favourite wishes every day and death of your whole body in the end submit with every fibre of your being, and you will find eternal life. Keep back nothing. Nothing that you have not given away will be really yours. Nothing in you that has not died will ever be raised from the dead. Look for yourself, and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay. But look for Christ and you will find Him, and with Him everything else thrown in.”*

Jesus made the secret to happiness absolutely plain in the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12). Blessedness or happiness consists of being poor, being meek, mourning, being persecuted, and the like. That is the path to happiness. It is about denial of self, as Jesus spoke about so often.