

Sunday Sermon - 13.12.20

Delivered by Rev'd Selina McMahon

**Sermon for Advent 3: "Gaudete! - Rejoice!"**

In 1972, Steeleye Span released the song, Gaudete. I won't sing it but the first line is "Gaudete, gaudete Christos est natus Ex Maria virgine, gaudete." Rejoice, Christ is born of Mary." Gaudete. Rejoice. The word is sprinkled throughout today's readings: in Isaiah, the prophet proclaims that God has sent him to bring "glad tidings to the poor" and "I rejoice heartily in the Lord, in my God is the joy of my soul" whereas St. Paul instructs his followers to "Rejoice always".

The Hebrew language has more words for joy and rejoicing than any other language. It's worth noting that firstly, Hebrew religious rituals proclaim God as the source of joy. Secondly that in contrast to the rituals of other faiths of the East, Israelite worship was essentially a joyous proclamation and celebration. And thirdly, the good Israelite regarded the act of thanking God as the supreme joy of his life.

As we see in our readings, pure joy is joy in God as both its source and object. Like a circle: God gives joy to us and we return it back to God. The Old Testament is actually a book of joy!

One thing many people have forgotten in their Christian pilgrimage is the duty to be joyful. Maybe one of the reasons that Jesus used a little child as the sole embodiment of the kingdom of God is the innate joyfulness of children. For those of us who are adults, one of the things that make Christmas so joyful is seeing the wide-eyed expressions of wonder on little faces. Children know about joy. Somehow we adults seem to lose that awe and wonder somewhere along the road.

And in some ways we lose it when we read such readings as today's Gospel. We concentrate on the figure of John the Baptist more than the message that John proclaimed. John proclaimed a message of rejoicing, but we usually concentrate on the coat of camel hair and the eating of locusts and wild honey. We emphasise the "brood of vipers" incident and miss the "one is coming after me whose sandals I am not fit to untie" which we heard last week.

John's message is different to most because John isn't as egocentric as we all are. Generally speaking, our favourite subject is ourselves. We love to talk about ourselves to whoever is unfortunate to be the listener. When we meet people and they ask, "Tell me about yourself", we mentally clap our hands and prepare to launch into our favourite subject. But that didn't happen with John.

The Pharisees came and asked John who he was. John was given the perfect opportunity to bolster his image and really make a name for himself. However, John did the unexpected and pointed away from himself and towards Christ.

John was unique. It's not surprising that his individuality surprised and wrong-footed his questioners. True, there had been prophets before who had lived in a similar vein to John. Such prophets had proclaimed the word of God and had looked forward to the Messiah. But John was different - even his birth was different as he was born, as Luke tells us, to parents who were past child-bearing age.

John was called to be the prophet of the Most High, to go before the Lord to prepare his way. And John was, really, the last prophet in this mould. He was last because the Messiah had indeed come and subsequently conquered. He has left an apostleship - a discipleship which we have inherited and which we enjoy today. As the gospel spreads we see a variety of styles of that discipleship. Evangelical and catholic. Bells and smells or happy-clappy. They are all valid in bringing Jesus to people. As our Lord himself said, those who are not against us, are for us.

The more we concentrate on Jesus the less we will be worried about having our names in lights. Because God is light - there is no neon sign that can come anywhere near the pure light of the word of God.

At this time of year, we need to let joy into our hearts. If your heart is aching this Advent season for any reason: If something stands in the way of joy, let it go. Don't be sour faced in spreading the good news of Jesus. Instead remember, Gaudete. Rejoice!