

3rd Sunday of Advent

Year C

A Day Of Festival.

Today we sing and shout for joy with Christ, the Lord of the Dance, who brings us the Good News of our redemption, and renews us by his love.

(Readings: Zephaniah 3: 14-18. Philippians 4: 4-7. Luke 3: 10-18.)

Imagine, if you will, that you are shuffling along to work on an early winter's morning. It is a dreary, wet Monday morning and Friday is simply too far away even to think about.

Out of the cold drizzle, with its fine rain that soaks you right through, a woman you think you recognise comes towards you. You can see from the spring in her step, and from the bright expression on her face, that she is very happy. You wonder if she is actually right-minded. Perhaps she is slightly over medicated. Maybe she's been at the mulled wine already.

As she gets closer you notice that she appears somehow lit up from the inside, and her face has a distinct glow to it as she beams with a radiant joy. Just as you are about to pass her by, she suddenly throws her arms around you and embraces you, and kisses you on the one cheek, and then on the other, just for good measure.

You look at her as if she were mad. 'What can anyone have to smile about on such a damp, miserable day, a day when one half of the world is hungry, and the other half is at war? She is puzzled by your clearly bemused expression, but then gives you a playful wink, and goes off on her merry way, her joy unaffected, leaving you standing there in your bewilderment.

There is nothing quite so puzzling as someone else's joy, most especially when you are feeling down or, conversely, someone else's sadness when you are feeling on top of the world. The greatest puzzle for most of us is when people are joyful in the midst of great suffering and desolation, when people just refuse to be locked into an environment of manifest, palpable despair.

For example, like the prophet Zephaniah calling out, amidst the ruined slums of a defeated Jerusalem, calling for a grand party to celebrate the 'fortune' of the people. Or again, like St Paul, a condemned prisoner, in his cold, drab cell, awaiting execution, writing letters to cheer other people up. Or again, like John the Baptist, a 'wilderness voice' in hostile, occupied territory, announcing 'Good News' to his countrymen. One cannot help but wonder if they weren't all mad!

Zephaniah, St. Paul, and John the Baptist, each shared one and the same belief, that the Lord was very near. And God's nearness filled them with a thorough, deep-rooted joy, a joy which nothing, and which no one, could take away from them – not even the threat of death or destruction.

Their joy in the closeness of God gave an edge to their preaching, exhorting others to 'make ready', to 'prepare the way'. It gave them a vision which saw beyond disaster. And it moved them to draw others into that self-same sense of joy. None of them was separated by, or isolate in, their own elation. Without reserve, or distraction they, each, reached out, hoping that their divinely inspired bliss would be caught by others.

I must admit, the picture of John the Baptist, as a man who moves about in a state of profound joy is not one you hear of very often. He is more commonly portrayed as a solitary figure, with a strange taste in clothes, and a yet stranger diet, someone who rants and raves at ‘anyone who has ears to hear’.

But John was a compelling, charismatic character who intrigued people, prompting them to seek him out and, also to follow him. People didn’t journey into the wilderness to be insulted. People didn’t become his disciples because they admired his taste in fashion, or because of his gourmet food.

In John the Baptist, the people truly caught something of God’s way, something of God’s joy. It is because of this that people asked him, “What must we do?” John’s answer was to challenge people’s generosity. and sense of fairness so that others might, likewise, have reason to rejoice, to give food to the hungry, and clothes to those who have none.

When the tax-collectors ask John what they should do, he tells them to keep to the going rate, which is to say, not to over-tax people in order to cream off the extra share for themselves. “People are burdened enough. Be just.”

To the soldiers who accompanied the tax-collectors, to protect them, and to give a ‘bit of muscle’ to the collectors’ tax demands’, John tells these heavies, not to use their position as a weapon for their own reward. “Be content with your pay and stop stealing from the poor and the weak. Be happy in doing what is just.”

John makes such a deep impression on people that word goes around that he might even be the Christ. Again, that expectancy is a measure of John’s powerful effect on people. John doesn’t claim to know who the Messiah is. All he knows is that he is not him. That role is for someone else, someone far greater, and far more powerful than he could ever be.

John the Baptist, and St Paul, both shared a profound sense of God’s nearness. Both were executed by the sword. But even in that, their joy in God’s closeness was a joy, a power, which carried them through all their times of horror.

And so, neither ever had to deny the difficulty of their experience. Both men faced an opposition determined to destroy them. Both had a belief in an ‘immediate power’, which encouraged them, far beyond the reality of imprisonment and, even execution.

We all need a power that carries us through difficult times, spurring us on when we face the reality of our weaknesses and limitations.

Our belief in the abiding presence of a God who cares will, likewise, give us a deep ‘abiding’ sense of joy. And his presence will challenge our generosity. It will call on our sense of justice. And it will enable us to continue, even though all our days may feel like dreary Mondays. And who knows? It may even put a spring in our step, as we journey on through Advent.

John, what must we do?