

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

The entrance antiphon for the third Sunday of Advent remains the traditional one: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice. Indeed the Lord is near". It's from Paul's letter to the Philippians, part of the passage that we happily hear today. Its first word in Latin is "Gaudete" – hence the common title for this day, "Gaudete Sunday". Whatever the history of this term, today's readings (though not so much the gospel) are filled with an infectious spirit of joy.

At this mid-point of the season our hopes and expectations are intensifying. The feast of Christmas will soon be here. Today's celebration gives us the opportunity to look beyond the hectic demands that December makes of us. It invites us to find a deeper source of joy than that offered by all our end-of-the-year activities. This sure joy is truly the gift of God.

A reading from the prophet Zephaniah

3:14-18

First Reading

Shout for joy, daughter of Zion,
Israel, shout aloud!
Rejoice, exult with all your heart,
daughter of Jerusalem!
The Lord has repealed your sentence;
he has driven your enemies away.
The Lord, the king of Israel, is in your midst;
you have no more evil to fear.
When that day comes, word will come to Jerusalem:
Zion, have no fear,
do not let your hands fall limp.
The Lord your God is in your midst,
a victorious warrior.
He will exult with joy over you,
he will renew you by his love;
he will dance with shouts of joy for you
as on a day of festival.

We hear from Zephaniah only twice and briefly in the three year cycle of Sunday readings, once on this day and again in Ordinary Time (Year A). A separate short passage (1:14-18, worth a look) found its way into the hugely influential medieval hymn known as the *Dies irae*. This was the sequence for the Mass for the Dead until set aside after Vatican II.

Zephaniah was active in the southern kingdom of Judah in the late 7th century BC, not long before Jeremiah and the disaster of the Babylonian exile. His work is recorded in a short book of three chapters. Much of it is a dire warning of divine judgement on a people that has abandoned the God of Israel in favour of false gods, but it ends with a promise of salvation.

It's this promise that we hear today, from the final chapter of the book. Zephaniah invites the faithful few, the remnant, to join in a song of joy. Not only has Israel been delivered from its enemies, the prophet says, but "the Lord your God is in your midst". Even more strikingly, the Lord "will dance with shouts of joy for you". What an image, a loving God dancing for joy among his people!

Like last week's reading from Baruch, this is an exultant canticle to be proclaimed with positive energy, but not rushed. The tone should be one of solemn joy. Readers should respect the poetic layout of the lines and give each verse its proper time and attention.

Responsorial Psalm

Isaiah 12:2-6

Responsorial Psalm

R. Cry out with joy and gladness:
for among you is the great and Holy One of Israel.

Truly, God is my salvation,
I trust, I shall not fear.
For the Lord is my strength, my song,
he became my saviour.
With joy you will draw water
from the wells of salvation. R.

Give thanks to the Lord,
give praise to his name!
make his mighty deeds known to the peoples!
Declare the greatness of his name. R.

Sing a psalm to the Lord
for he has done glorious deeds,
make them known to all the earth!
People of Zion, sing and shout for joy
for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel. R.

Occasionally the text of the responsorial psalm is not taken from the Book of Psalms itself but from elsewhere in the Bible where psalm-like prayers are found. Today we respond to the reading from Zephaniah with a song of praise from the prophet Isaiah. They echo each other in language and spirit. In the psalm God is strength and song and salvation; the people are to "sing and shout for joy, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel".

The tone of the psalm is exultant throughout. It is a song of praise for salvation. God is thanked and praised for the saving power he has shown to his people and for his presence in their midst. The jubilant confidence of the prayer is evident in the string of imperatives: "give thanks", "make known", "declare", "sing" and "shout". Readers should have no difficulty conveying the joy that pervades the whole psalm.

16 December 2018

A reading from the letter of St Paul to the Philippians 4:4-7

I want you to be happy, always happy in the Lord; I repeat, what I want is your happiness. Let your tolerance be evident to everyone: the Lord is very near. There is no need to worry; but if there is anything you need, pray for it, asking God for it with prayer and thanksgiving, and that peace of God, which is so much greater than we can understand, will guard your hearts and your thoughts, in Christ Jesus.

Second Reading

Like last Sunday, today's second reading is from Paul's affectionate letter to the Philippians. It is a short extract, wholly positive in tone. The litany of terms builds up a great sense of well-being as the reading progresses: "happy, happiness, tolerance, thanksgiving, peace". Even the prayer for something that they need is not to be offered anxiously but thankfully.

What Paul is doing is much more than expressing fondness for the Philippians. He wants to gather them into his embrace so they will share his own boundless faith in the love God has shown us in Christ Jesus. His declaration that "the Lord is very near" has a happy ambiguity. It could mean that Christ's return in glory is imminent or that Christ is even now intimately present in their midst.

Readers will surely be delighted to have such a lovely text to deliver.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke 3:10-18

When all the people asked John, 'What must we do?' he answered, 'If anyone has two tunics he must share with the man who has none, and the one with something to eat must do the same.' There were tax collectors too who came for baptism, and these said to him, 'Master, what must we do?' He said to them, 'Exact no more than your rate.' Some soldiers asked him in their turn, 'What about us? What must we do?' He said to them, 'No intimidation! No extortion! Be content with your pay!'

A feeling of expectancy had grown among the people, who were beginning to think that John might be the Christ, so John declared before them all, 'I baptise you with water, but someone is coming, someone who is more powerful than I am, and I am not fit to undo the strap of his sandals; he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fan is in his hand to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his barn; but the chaff he will burn in a fire that will never go out.' As well as this, there were many other things he said to exhort the people and to announce the Good News to them.

Gospel

Last Sunday's gospel linked the Baptist to the prophetic tradition of the past. Today's orients him to the messianic future that will be ushered in by Jesus. The intervening verses that convey John's scathing criticism of the crowd and his urgent warning to them to repent have been passed over.

The reading falls into two parts. The first consists of practical advice as to what those who wish to repent must do. People must share their food and clothing, and tax collectors and soldiers must not resort to extortion. The dangerous appeal of wealth will become a recurrent theme in Luke's gospel.

The second part introduces a radical distinction between the Baptist and the Messiah to come. John baptises with water for repentance, the one who is to come will baptise with the Holy Spirit and fire. The context suggests that the fire that John has in mind is the fire of divine judgement rather than that of Pentecost. Once imprisoned John himself appears to succumb to doubt that Jesus is the one he foreshadowed (Lk 7:18-35).

In contrasting John and Jesus, Luke and the other evangelists may be appealing to those who may have retained an allegiance to John and have not become followers of Jesus. All the same, Luke describes the Baptist's preaching as good news.