

Sermon preached on Third Sunday of Advent by Sister Margaret Anne at the 10am Parish Eucharist St Mary's Barnes 13 December 2020

Today, the third Sunday of Advent, is traditionally known as "Gaudete Sunday" or "Rejoice Sunday". This is because traditionally the first word of the introit for the Sung Eucharist for today in Latin is "Gaudete" – "Rejoice". The antiphon is from Paul's fourth chapter of the letter to the Philippians: "Rejoice in the Lord always". This note of rejoicing is captured in our first reading today from Isaiah (Isaiah 61.1-4,8-11):

"I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God".

This chapter coming late in the book of Isaiah may well have referred to the time when the exiles had returned from captivity in Babylon to their homeland in Jerusalem. But when they did return, not all was plain sailing. There was a massive task of restoration to be accomplished.

Nevertheless, today marks a note of rejoicing in this penitential season of Advent. The Advent candle for today is pink, to indicate this theme of rejoicing and praise. This third Sunday of Advent is also one in which traditionally the Church focuses attention on John the Baptist. Our hearts and minds are drawn to reflect on John's message of repentance and salvation in Jesus Christ. John's parents were Zechariah, a priest of the Temple and Elizabeth, a cousin of Mary the mother of Jesus. John spent some time in the wilderness as an adult. His clothing of camel's hair and diet of locusts and wild honey recalled that of the Old Testament prophets. When he appeared publicly on the banks of the Jordan he preached a message of repentance and the coming of the Kingdom of God. His tone was often fiery. Large crowds were attracted to him, and he baptized Jesus himself. John clearly recognised Jesus as the Messiah as prophesied of old. In our gospel reading today from the first chapter of John (John 1.6-8,19-28) we are introduced to John the Baptist. Of all four gospels, John gives the most detail about John the Baptist and his testimony. In today's passage some religious leaders have come from Jerusalem to question John about who he really is. John responds by making it clear who he is not. He is not the Christ. Nor is he Elijah. John goes on to quote from the prophet Isaiah and proclaims of himself:

"I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,
"Make straight the way of the Lord"."

John's role is to prepare the way for Jesus, the Christ, the Anointed One as prophesied in the Old Testament scriptures. Although John does not claim this for himself, Jesus later recognises that John is the greatest of all the prophets, for he stands on the very threshold of that Kingdom of God that Jesus himself ushers in, through his own life and ministry, and later his death, resurrection and ascension.

In this season of Advent, in which we prepare ourselves for once again celebrating the birth of Jesus, the witness of John the Baptist can serve to remind us that however dark the times may be, nevertheless there is cause to testify to the light, to that light that is Christ in our midst. We certainly live in dark times, with a global pandemic raging around the planet. This year has been one of tragic loss for so many, with huge numbers of people suffering from and dying from Covid 19, and difficulties and challenges for all, with so many restrictions to our lives, and huge economic hardship for many. Today we may discover whether there will be a deal for the UK with the European Union or not. There have been so many causes of anxiety, so many scenarios of uncertainty this year, that many have struggled to cope. In all this darkness and loss, it is imperative that we cling to hope. The gospel message of salvation must always give us reason to hope.

St John the Baptist unfailingly pointed to Jesus. Tomorrow, 14 December, is the feast day of another saint called John: St John of the Cross. St John of the Cross was born in sixteenth century Spain in the year 1542. He was a Carmelite friar and co-founder of the Discalced Carmelite friars. "Discalced" meant that the friars went barefoot as a visible sign that they were reformed friars. John was of a noble, impoverished family, brought up by his widowed mother. It was a decisive meeting with St Teresa of Avila that led John to join the Discalced Reform.

In 1575 the jealous Carmelite friars of his former order imprisoned John at Toledo. He remained incarcerated for nine months in appalling, cramped conditions, before he eventually escaped. Yet it was while in confinement that he wrote some of his finest poetry, verses from the Spiritual Canticle, which takes the form of a dialogue between the soul and its spouse, Christ. His other main works are: The Ascent of Mount Carmel, The Dark Night of the Soul, and The Living Flame of Love. These are spiritual commentaries on his finest poems. In his poetry John of the Cross demonstrates how personal suffering can be used creatively for God. He writes of the need to enter further into the "thicket of the Cross". We might compare this with some of Jesus' hard sayings.

John's spirituality is in the tradition of the Via Negativa, the negative way. His writings have often been misunderstood and dismissed as gloomy and morbid. One of his main concerns is the soul's detachment from the attractions of the world. God can be found in the darkness, in detachment from the world and in suffering. The soul that suffers is united to Christ.

An age-old theological problem is the question: "How do we reconcile human suffering and evil with the God of love?" The Bible grapples with this question most especially in the Book of Job. The question of suffering remains a mystery, but somehow it has to be related back to God. Suffering is hidden in the very heart of God, and is most especially revealed in Christ on the cross.

John of the Cross chose the path of creative suffering. When he was dying he deliberately chose to go to a religious house where he knew he would be ill-treated. Typically, he won round his persecutor in the end. John was a great poet, but first and foremost a great mystic, "in love" with God. After receiving a mystical vision, John of the Cross did a very striking drawing called "Christ crucified", which is preserved at the Convent of the Incarnation at Avila in Spain. Spending time gazing on this simple yet stark drawing, one can imagine the cruelty of Christ's sufferings on the cross. One can be drawn to see the sufferings in our own lives in the light of Christ's sufferings. John of the Cross' small, striking image inspired the modern painter Salvador Dali in 1951 to paint the much better-known work, "Christ of St John of the Cross". In both images Christ is seen hanging on the cross from above, as if gazed on by his loving Father, who shares his agony. Likewise the viewer of the drawing, the painting, is drawn to empathise with Christ, to feel his sorrow and dereliction.

But I would like to end with a note not of darkness but of light, on this "Rejoice Sunday". And that seems doubly appropriate, as today is the feast day of St Lucy, a native of Syracuse in Sicily, who was martyred for her faith in the early fourth century. Her name in Latin literally means Light. She became associated with Jesus the one true Light, the Saviour of the world, who would lighten the darkness and bring hope to the world. As we journey through this latter part of Advent, however trying our circumstances and our times may be, may we nevertheless do so with joy and expectation in our hearts. May we ask the Spirit to fill us with wisdom and light as we prepare ourselves for the celebration of the great feast of the Incarnation, the Word made flesh, our Saviour, Jesus Christ.