

Sunday, December 16, 2012

Third Sunday in Advent (C)

### Rejoice in the Lord Always!

In our papers and other media we are told how many shopping days to Christmas are left. We have seen Christmas decorations in the stores and heard Christmas carols on the radio since Thanksgiving. Now we can actually see Christmas trees for sale and nervously hurry to write our Christmas cards. The big feast is quickly drawing near. But amid the bustle of material preparation other voices call out to us showing us how we should really prepare for the coming feast.

“Rejoice in the Lord always! I say it again, Rejoice,” St. Paul urges in his letter to the Philippians, one of Paul’s warmest and friendliest epistles. Joy and rejoicing is a recurrent theme in this epistle. In this passage taken from the final chapter of the letter it is the tenth time that St. Paul tells his audience to rejoice.<sup>1</sup> The dictionary defines joy as a: “*the emotion evoked by well-being, success, or great fortune or by the prospect of possessing what one desires* b: *the expression or exhibition of such emotion.*”<sup>2</sup>

The joy of which St. Paul speaks is different, much deeper than the one given by the dictionary although it is a start. St. Paul’s “joy” goes to the very center of our being.

We often find our joy in another person for what he or she brings us. We also can find our joy (or sadness) in what happens to him or her. St. Paul tells us “to rejoice in the Lord.” But “in the Lord” is a common phrase used by him. This is an important phrase, because it implies union with Christ, the source of our joy. It means in addition that this joy cannot be cut short by any exterior difficulty. Paul writes:

For I am certain that neither death nor life, neither angels nor principalities, neither the present nor the future, nor powers, neither height nor depth nor any other creature, will be able to separate us from the love of God that comes to us in Christ Jesus, our Lord

(Rom 8:39).<sup>3</sup>

There is much to ponder in these words. Our journey through life brings us face to face with many difficulties and sorrows as well as fleeting joys. We cannot deny the terrible events around us that seem to put an end to our happiness: an alcoholic husband, a wife with cancer, the heartbreaking death of an immediate member of the family or close friend, even the massacre of twenty-eight individuals, most of them innocent children as happened a few days ago.

The joy of the epistle is not a noisy manifestation, but rather marked by serenity and peace. We sometimes find this type of quiet joy in the presence of an invalid or an elderly person whose whole life

was marked by the surrender of each event to the will of God, a surrender not of obligation, but out of love. This is a joy that places each anxious thought in the hands of a loving God.

This joy is born of the nearness of God. When St. Paul tells us that “The Lord is near,” one possible understanding is, of course, his second coming. Another one for us, more immediate, is of course, the physical nearness of Christmas. But there is yet another sense in which he is near. Nearness understood as presence.

Most basically he is present in our hearts. Christ is present to us in the Scriptures through which he teaches us as he taught his first followers. He is also present in the sacraments, guiding and directing us. Jesus is near to us in the Eucharist not only as presence but also as food to nourish and energize us for the battle against darkness with which all his followers have to contend. He is also present in the men and women who have followed him and so bear him and his message to us and the world.<sup>4</sup>

Rejoicing in the Lord calls for our response and reaching out to others. In today’s reading, St. Paul tells us “Your kindness should be known to all.” We find this expanded in his epistle to the Romans 12:4-17: Your love must be sincere...Love one another with the affection of brothers. Anticipate each other in showing respect...Look on the needs of the saints as your own, be generous in offering hospitality. Bless your persecutors, bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Have the same attitude towards all. Put away ambitious thoughts and associate with those who are lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation. Never repay injury with injury.

Another voice that calls out to us today from the readings is that great Advent figure – St. John the Baptist. Normally we do not associate him with joy. The image we have of him is that of a gaunt severe figure preaching hellfire and damnation. But we forget that he was the babe who leapt, danced, if you will, in his mother’s womb at the advent of the unborn Savior, or that described himself in relationship to Christ as the “friend of the bridegroom.” In spite of a rough exterior, he must have been a happy man since he gave himself totally to God’s will for him. The following verses from John’s gospel are telling. “John gave this testimony:

I saw the Spirit descend like a dove from the sky, and it came to rest on him. But I did not recognize him. The one who sent me to baptize with water told me, “When you see the Spirit descend and rest on someone, it is he who is to baptize with the Holy Spirit” (Jn 1:32-33).

And how could he not be filled with joy as he exultantly exclaimed to his followers “Look! There goes the Lamb of God” (Jn 1:36). John’s joy was in the Lord.

The people, and we with them, ask John, “What are we to do?” How are we to attain to that joy of which our second reading speaks? It is not enough for them, for us to listen to teaching. It must be put into practice. The Baptist preaches conversion; <sup>5</sup> Jesus preaches conversion – ongoing conversion until we die. John’s response, as is St. Paul’s, is simple. He requires nothing extraordinary, but like Christ, and St. John the Baptist, a total dedication to the Father’s will. We cannot achieve it in a day or a year, but by God’s grace we will progress along this way until we find that perfect joy and perfect peace in the unveiled presence of God.

Fr, Boniface Von Nell

Endnotes

1 Daniel E. Pilarczyk, Live Letters (Cincinnati, Ohio, St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2002) 28

2 <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/joy>

3. Days of the Lord, the Liturgical Year, v.1 (Collegeville, Minn., 1991) 117

4 Pilarczyk, 29

5 Days of the Lord, 118