

Homily: Third Sunday of Advent 2021 (Year C)

This week I sat down and made a list of all the things I had to do to get ready for Christmas, both in the parish and my own personal preparations. It's fairly lengthy, and unfortunately I'm still at the stage where the list is getting longer, because I keep thinking of new things to add to it, and these are coming at a faster rate than they are getting crossed off the list! What I should probably also do is make a list of the things I should do to prepare spiritually for Christmas – how much time I will devote to prayer, how I will ready my heart to welcome Jesus more fully, when I might get to confession, and so on. It's precisely that question: "What must we do?" that is on the minds of those who come to John the Baptist in today's Gospel, tax collectors and soldiers amongst them. These were amongst the most unpopular people of the time, and yet they are the very ones who are most keen to get themselves ready for the Messiah, the ones who look forward to His coming, the ones who know their need of a Saviour.

John's response is to remind them of the need for simple goodness and justice. He teaches that those with plenty must share their food and clothing. The tax collectors are only to take what is fair, and not charge extra so they can pocket some cash for themselves. The soldiers must not abuse their power to mistreat people and must be content with what they have. John is saying to them, and to us: seek genuine goodness, honesty and fairness. But he also notes that someone is coming who is greater than He is; and the One who is coming will make greater demands. When Jesus begins His preaching, He will not be content with simple justice and goodness: He will demand that we forgive, turn the other cheek and go the extra mile. But we cannot begin to really hear His teaching, let alone live it, if we do not first prepare ourselves by seeking the basic goodness for which every human should strive.

The crowds know very well that the Messiah, the Christ, is coming, and today's Gospel tells us that "a feeling of expectancy had grown among the people." John no doubt adds to this when he proclaims the greatness of the One who is coming. Although Jesus isn't even mentioned by name in today's Gospel, we can almost sense Him stood in the background, there in the crowd but not yet recognised as the Christ. He is very near to them.

All of today's readings speak of this. St Paul, in the passage of Scripture which gives *Gaudete* Sunday its name, tells us to rejoice because "the Lord is very near." The prophet Zephaniah opens today's first reading by telling us, "Shout for joy!... Rejoice, exult with all your heart... The Lord, the king of Israel, is in your midst." And the psalm response which we said together echoes these words: "Sing and shout for joy, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel." Again and again we are told to rejoice, because the Lord is at hand; He is very near.

This is not simply because Christmas is now very close. It's also because today, and always, the Lord *is* very close – not just in the future, but here, now, in the present. We can only know this by faith, but when we approach life with a strong faith, very often we see clearly just how close He is. Just as Jesus walked among the people before they knew who He was,

so too He walks alongside us today, even when we don't recognise His presence. And this is important, because it means we are never alone. The one who believes is never alone.

The future is never certain – the last two years have taught us all that lesson – but as people of faith, we always face the future with a certain confidence. We do not face it alone. That message is also clearly in our readings today. Zephaniah tells us: “The Lord, the king of Israel, is in your midst: you have no more evil to fear.” The psalm: “Truly, God is my salvation. I trust, I shall not fear.” St Paul: “The Lord is very near. There is no need to worry.” The Lord is saying to us: do not look to the future with anxiety or despair, but look with hope, with that feeling of expectancy that our Saviour is very close.

There is a world of difference between facing the future alone and facing it with someone we love and trust. Today's readings remind us: we never face the future alone. We face it with Jesus, who has already taken every human suffering on Himself and has carried our burdens. He is our Saviour. Rejoice that the Lord is close; believe that He is near, alongside you, and put your hope in Him. That is the message of today's readings. Faith does not take away all our problems, but it does mean that we never face them alone. Ever. We face them with Jesus, who has already conquered even our greatest fear, death, and has overcome.

Alexander Pope once wrote “Hope springs eternal”. It quickly caught on as a proverbial phrase, perhaps because it captures an important truth. We are a people of hope; we are made to hope, and our hope is not deceptive, because it is founded on our faith in Christ, our Saviour. “With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation”, we heard in today's psalm. Hope springs eternal, because it is drawn from the eternal fount of goodness which is the love of God. That love makes Him draw close to us. It moves Him to stand by us in every trial. It is the real reason for and the real meaning of Christmas. Let us find joy in this truth and always draw hope from the well of the Saviour.

Fr Andrew

