

“Joy to the World”

Here we are on the third Sunday of Advent. As we said during the lighting of the Advent Wreath, the candles of Hope and Peace are burning brightly and now we have lit the candle of Joy. This third Sunday of Advent is the Sunday of Joy because of the Latin antiphon that is traditionally prayed or sung on this day. It begins with the word *Gaudete* which translated into English is rejoice or joy. The entire antiphon reads in English "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. LORD, you were favorable to your land; you restored the fortunes of Jacob."¹

We light a rose colored candle to symbolize the joy of this day. The rose is one of the flowers identified with the Virgin Mary as is the color. Sometimes on this Sunday we also read, recite or sing the Magnificat or the Song of Mary from the Gospel of Luke. It is the song that Mary sings when she visits her cousin Elizabeth.

Both have been visited by the Angel Gabriel to be told that they will have children born in miraculous circumstances. The miracle for Elizabeth is that she beyond childbearing years. The miracle for Mary is that she is a virgin. Such remarkable births are part of the Biblical tradition that goes all the way back to Sarah in the Book of Genesis. The circumstances of Mary's remarkable pregnancy and song have strong parallels to Hannah's conception and birth of the prophet Samuel in the First Book of Samuel.

We who are anticipating the birth of Jesus and share with Mary and Joseph in that anticipation are also sharing in the happiness that they experience as the day of that birth draws near. However, joy is not to be confused with happiness. Happiness is a transient emotional experience. St. Thomas Aquinas, one of the Doctors of the Church, wrote that "Joy admits no sorrow for it is not an act of the sensitive faculties." That is, joy is not an emotion so it cannot succumb to feelings of sadness. Franciscan Richard Rohr makes it clear that joy cannot be changed by our circumstance. That if we make the decision to live in joy no matter what happens to us in our lives e.g. pain, illness, poverty, disability or any other misfortune we still live in the joy of God. We can be miserable and still be joyful. It seems to be a conundrum, because our society and the world have conflated joy and happiness into one state of being.

Joy is a way of life that is sustained by the love of God. Aquinas would say it is an act of the will. We decide to rejoice in God and the joy that comes from that is self-sustaining and fulfilling. Not only is it possible to be joyful in this powerful way, it is one of the characteristics that marks the great saints and martyrs of the church.

Another conundrum that we Anglicans deal with is that as long as we are in the season of Advent we do not sing Christmas carols. Thus on *Gaudete* Sunday you will not hear "Joy to the World" sung in an Episcopal Church, because we reserve Christmas carols for the Christmas season. The world that surrounds us is happy to be singing Christmas carols starting no later than Thanksgiving Day. Indeed, there are some radio stations that play Christmas music all the year 'round. It is unquestionable that music of the Christmas season is uplifting, beautiful, pensive,

¹ The first four sentences of the antiphon for Advent III are Philippians 4:4–6. The last sentence is Psalm 85:1.

joyful, and rich, but if we are singing Christmas songs all the time we miss the other liturgical seasons and the richness of their music and the messages.

While Christmas may be the big holiday in the world outside of the Church, theologically the birth of Jesus pales in comparison to the Resurrection. We are certainly happy, even joyful, that the Lord has come, but it is the Resurrection from death that is the great promise of the Christian faith. It is life without end in the Glory of God that is so important. It is the life of peace, hope, joy and love that we share with God now in our decision to follow Jesus as the risen Lord, and in the life to come in the heavenly banquet with God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—and the Cloud of Saints that have gone before and will come after us. That is our greatest joy.

Imagine if instead of being frustrated that we are not singing Christmas carols in church during Advent we were to immerse ourselves in finding joy in the world and sharing it with others. Imagine the joy we have in sharing the love of God with a friend. Imagine the joy we have in knowing that when a friend or family member is ill that we are not powerless but that we can pray for their wellbeing and in doing so share God's love with them. Imagine the joy of knowing that we can make someone's day with a smile, a kind word, or a hug. Imagine the joy we have in knowing that when we are making Christmas plans they are including others who are alone or lonely during the holidays. There are so many ways that we can use the joyful resources of our hearts to help others find happiness and put them on the path to joy.

I hope our friend Cameron will not mind me pointing out the joy he shared with the merchants at The Christmas Shop yesterday. With the aid of Jane Kates he went from booth to booth with water and then treats for them. The joy in that youngster's heart was obvious. He was sharing more than a little refreshment with the vendors he was sharing a bit of himself. The determination and smile on his face made it clear that this was more than a chore or a way to help out. This was his way of letting others in on the joy in his heart and his love for and from God.

We only have to look to people like him to know how to find and share joy. Joy that extends beyond tinsel and wrapping paper; joy that goes beyond giving and getting gifts; joy that means more than singing carols when the rest of the world is singing them; joy that is more profound than any of the commercial, consumerist, flashy aspects of this pre-Christmas season.

Imagine the joy, find the joy, live the joy and share the joy. It is there for you and for you to give out in the same way our young friend did when he shared his joy with the world.