

Gaudete or Joy Sunday 11.12.16

Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?

Prayer

Today, the third Sunday of Advent, is known as Gaudete or Joy Sunday. Wonderful word "joy". One of my favourites. I've written it a lot lately on the Christmas cards I'm sending to family and friends. And surely as we wait again to celebrate Christmas and the birth of our Lord, there is a great joy to experience. It's named after the opening word for today's introit "Gaudete in Domino semper" " Rejoice in the Lord always". In our wonderful reading from Isaiah we hear how the faithful Israelites will return to Zion with singing; "everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness and sorrow and sighing shall flee away." Reminiscent of Isaac Watts' hymn, "Joy to the world, the Lord is come."

There was, however, no joy for John the Baptist at the start of our gospel reading this morning. He has been imprisoned for almost a year. This man of energy and passion, happy in the vast expanse of the wilderness, loving nature's beauty was now deprived of fresh air, of bodily exercise, of cheerful mental employment. He must have been so despondent in his forced idleness. How had he come to be in this situation? Not so long before crowds had flocked to hear his messages of repentance and the imminent arrival of Israel's Messiah. He had even recognised and baptised the Messiah, his own cousin, Jesus. John was a man of few words and they were often short and to the point. He had openly denounced Herod, the ruler of Galilee, for marrying Herodias, his brother Philip's ex- wife. Herod had also taken exception to John's fiery teaching that God's kingdom was near and that he, Herod, would be replaced by this Messiah, God's promised one.

So John battles with his own thoughts. Soon I'll be out of here! I'll be OK! The Messiah's on the scene! His prophecies declare that "He shall open prison doors and set the captives free." Surely Jesus will soon sweep through Israel, confront and topple Herod, releasing him, his cousin, and giving him a place of honour in his new kingdom. But after almost a year in a dark, smelly dungeon John was having second thoughts. He had heard that Jesus was gaining quite a reputation for befriending tax-collectors and sinners. What was going on? Jesus seemed to be working from a different script. This was not the show that he had rehearsed and prepared for. Is he or is he not the Messiah? So John decides to send two of his disciples to Jesus to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

Jesus doesn't answer the question directly. He doesn't say, "Yes, I'm the one!" That would cause more trouble than it was worth. He directs John's disciples to the evidence, to what they hear and see. Tell John how "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them." No mention of prisoners being released this time. And so uncertain messengers make their way back to John and we don't hear what he makes of Jesus' reply.

Time and time again in the gospels Jesus does not give simple answers to questions but rather throws them back and asks us what we make of them ourselves. He wants us to recognise the difference between what you believe because someone has told you directly and what you believe having come to your own conclusions. Jesus is not so much interested in what we believe, but rather the beliefs on which we build our lives. John had to wrestle with the evidence of who Jesus was.....and so must we! We are challenged with thinking for ourselves...not always easy! There is no one way to discover the saving grace of Jesus. I don't believe you have to have a special experience or behave in a way you might be told by certain preachers. We each have our

own individual journey. Faith comes from our own experiences, our own thinking, our own questioning...and the main question is "What do you think?" The evidence is there to come to our own conclusions. Evidence of the well chronicled life of Jesus - his teaching, his miracles, his death and resurrection appearances. The evidence of the magnificent awesomeness of creation. The evidence of the sheer joy we feel at the wonders of nature; the feeling of peace we receive in those quiet, special places. "Are you the one?" asks John. There is no direct answer from Jesus, instead he points to the evidence from which John must draw his own conclusion...and so must we!

Jesus also obliquely answers this question by praising John the Baptist and informing the crowds of his role. "This is the one about who it is written, see I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you." John is the last and greatest of the O.T. Prophets. He is Elijah! He is the one "to prepare the way" for the Messiah. The lamp that we can hold to lead us to the Light of the World. "No one", Jesus says, "born of woman has arisen greater than John the Baptist." Notice that even when times are so difficult, when he is in deep confinement, John refuses to stop looking, stop preparing, stop seeing. In his darkest moments he continues to search for the Light. John persists in turning his eye towards the Messiah, even in this forced and final enclosure. How shall we then turn our attention beyond our own walls, beyond our limits, so that we may receive the message, the Word that comes to us?

In this season of preparation, is there something we need to do to make it easier for Christ to enter our terrain and to be made known in this world? The incarnation takes place anew each day for Christ comes in the form of those whom we meet in our path. Like Jesus, it's no good forcing ourselves on others, simply telling them we are Christians. We must provide the evidence so that people hear of our Messiah-like goings-on.

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