

**+ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.**

The third Sunday of Advent is traditionally known as *Gaudete* or Rejoice Sunday. It is where we soften the purple tones of Advent with its penitential shade, to rose pink, a reminder that we are moving very close to the celebrations of Christmas. We think of Mary and Joseph travelling to Bethlehem. Tradition tells us they rode on a donkey and we know that the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem is around 100 km. Mary would be heavy with child, the road bumpy. No doubt they were accompanied by wider family members, all called to attend the town for the census. It would be a frightening and uncertain time for a first mother, fearful she may deliver her child along the way. Joseph too would be anxious, convinced as he was that the child Mary carried was from the Holy Spirit, aware also that Bethlehem was going to be crowded with people for the census.

This journey, as we know, ends joyfully and so today we call to mind the theme of rejoicing. When we light the candle in the Advent wreath this week, the pink candle, the words we speak remind us that it is easy to let other things get in the way of our joy. Sometimes we make ourselves too busy for joy. We must rush to the shop, get this or that organised, fill our heads with so much stuff that we become exhausted and not really happy at all. Much of this sense is environmental. When we do need to go out everyone is rushing around. There are crowds when we get there, and we can't find a carpark. This year, unlike other years previously, we must book first to attend activities – that is providing the event has not been cancelled due to the various restrictions which keep coming and going.

Therefore 2020 is a more stressful year than usual. There are people among you who won't be able to see your family members and share Christmas. Holiday plans and travel over the season are less certain. More than ever do we need to rejoice. We are reminded that joy is an attitude, a choice. We can decide to suppress our joy because we are so used to being consumed with other matters.

Sometimes we feel we shouldn't be happy because of something else that is going on in our lives. There is always something else going on! If we keep waiting for some free time to allow ourselves to feel joy, then we will wait for ever. Life without joy creates bitterness and unhappiness. Choose joy. Seek joy. Take hold of it when it comes because the feeling is precious. Try and remember when you were a young child before the troubles of teenage years made you realise that growing up was complex and not altogether pleasant. Remember the spontaneous joy you would sometimes feel, sometimes for no reason, how you wanted to laugh, to run and skip in careless abandon. We have all trained ourselves away from joy.

Today however, we are called to reclaim joy. Christmas is coming. Difficult families aside, this time is about the birth of Christ in the world, changing everything for ever. Christ coming is the most important aspect of Christmas, not the turkey or the presents, or even the family we love.

The readings for the third Sunday in Advent reflect the theme of rejoicing. From the prophet Isaiah we are given great news. The Lord will bring deliverance for the people who suffer and are broken hearted. He will release those held in bondage, who are subject to oppression and injustice. The Lord God stands opposed to those who commit injustices against others, who subject and humiliate the people. This news must bring joy in every age when people experience sufferings of all kinds. It brought joy to the people of Israel when they were persecuted and separated. It brings joy now to the ongoing sufferings of people, no matter where in the world they experience injustice at the hands of others. This news is for those in sweatshops worked to exhaustion in Asia barely able to earn enough money to feed their family. It is for the girl prostitutes and the boy soldiers, for the abused child in a suburban home, a beaten wife, a frightened old man in a nursing home.

It is good news for the Rohingya people, for Chinese Moslems, Mexican refugees lining up at the US border, families in bombed out cities of Syria, for Afghani women veiled in black, for Aboriginal people longing for proper recognition.

The Lord is coming. Right relationship will be restored for the people. God's justice will be done. And so, the prophet Isaiah declares his rejoicing and his exultation.

The exultation would later be echoed by Mary at the visitation of Elizabeth when the child within Elizabeth leaped for joy at the sound of Mary's greeting. This child was of course John who would become the Baptist, the one who prepared the people for the coming of Jesus, who humbly refused the status of prophet and Messiah when others wanted to give it to him. At this quickening of Elizabeth's child and her joyful exclamation, Mary responds with the song of praise which we know today in the church as the Magnificat. It is a joy filled song which reminds us again that the Lord is near, and God has come to the people.

On Friday night when the parish gathered for our Christmas party and mission planning presentation, we finished the evening with a section of Paul's Letter to the Thessalonians. 'Rejoice always,' the apostle declares – what a way to end a letter of encouragement to the church. Rejoice always, keep praying, keep giving thanks to God. Do not quench the Spirit of God, remembering the prophetic words from Isaiah that the Lord will bring about justice. Do not despise the words of the prophets, Paul warns. The Lord is coming.

The gathering of St Luke's people on Friday night was encouraging and wonderful. You are an amazing group of people who have weathered the storms of 2020 with faith and determination to see our work through, to achieve the vision and mission we have set out to accomplish. We are a family gathered around Christ and we eagerly wait to celebrate at the cradle of his birth, remembering that our festivals come in cycles, but Christ the eternal King is always with us.

And so, rejoice in the Lord. Do not waste your time worrying about things you cannot change. Make time for joy. Look for joy in unexpected places. Joy can and does exist alongside sadness and heartache. It is the will of God that you be joyful in his coming. Even if the word 'joy' is no longer fashionable, the meaning never fades away. Smile when you would rather frown. Laugh when you can. Notice if you start feeling resentful or bitter and walk away. Feel the joy of giving and receiving with no expectations. Let go of stress. Look into someone else's eyes and smile with genuine human love for another. Your neighbour's joy might depend on you.

Christ is coming. Rejoice always. Amen.