

Rejoice, ye anointed ones!

Third Sunday of Advent – Cycle B – December 13, 2020

Readings: Isa 61:1-2a, 10-11; 1 Thess 5:16-24; Jn 1:6-8, 19-28.

“I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God” (Isa 61:10)

Prologue: The ‘Entrance Antiphon’ of the Third Sunday of Advent—traditionally called ‘*Gaudete* Sunday’ and literally meaning ‘Rejoice Sunday’—says: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice..... The Lord is at hand” (Phil 4:4). It gives us a theme, i.e., rejoice, and a reason to rejoice, i.e., ‘The Lord is near’. This Sunday marks the halfway point of the Advent season and we can sense that the Lord is, indeed, near to us.

Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. The first reading from ‘Third Isaiah’ is most popular and often used in the liturgy for ordinations to priesthood. These words of encouragement and promise are uttered by one of Isaiah’s disciples to his people in exile. First, in the opening verses, he speaks in his own name (vv.1-2); while, second, in the ‘conclusion’—which reads: “I will greatly rejoice” (vv.10-11)—he speaks in the person of the New Jerusalem rejoicing in her newfound salvation. God’s Spirit is indispensable for any work of salvation; hence, the prophet announces that he is anointed with the Spirit of God to bring “good news” to the poor of every kind: brokenhearted, captives, prisoners and those who mourn. Jesus will identify himself as the one in whom this prophecy is fulfilled (Lk 4:18-21). Moreover, he gives it flesh-and-blood expression in his words and works in the power of God’s Spirit. The salvation announced in the opening verses overflows into joy in the second part. Joy is closely connected with salvation. Post-exile, the faithful look forward with hopeful and joyful anticipation to the advent of the promised Messiah. The “year of the Lord’s favour” (v.2) is a reference to the jubilee year (see Lev 25) which was held every 49th year wherein all slaves were set free and all loans and debts ceased to be binding. The year of liberation from the Babylonian Exile was one such year; but much more was expected at the arrival of the Messiah.
2. The second reading echoes the theme of joy with its opening line: “Rejoice always!” Apostle Paul wrote this letter to the converts at Thessalonica who, despite persecutions and difficulties, persevered in their faith and their love for Christ. Paul exhorts the Thessalonian Christians: “Do not quench the Spirit But test everything ...” (vv.19,21) for them to allow the Spirit full control to bear fruit in them. He also speaks of the “coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (v.23). It’s important to remind ourselves that Advent not only commemorates the First Coming of Christ (incarnation), but also his Second Coming (Last Judgment) when the history of salvation will find final fulfillment. The first three injunctions—namely, “rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances” (vv.16-18)—are very valuable and relevant for us, today, for Paul adds, “this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you”. Christians aware of the power of the Spirit in their lives and the fruits of the Spirit in their ministry are ever grateful to God and joyful bearers of Christ’s good news. Indeed, when Paul speaks of the “fruit of the Spirit” he puts ‘joy’ immediately after love (Gal 5:22). But this joy is not self-centered, rather, finds its fulfillment in serving others. The passage concludes with: “The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this” (v.24). Haven’t we experienced the fidelity of a God who never fails us once we surrender to God’s Spirit?

3. The spotlight in the gospel passage is on John the Baptist, a herald of the Messiah, full of the Holy Spirit, whose parents Zechariah and Elizabeth, too, receive the Spirit in large measure (see Lk 1:41,67). Announcing the ‘special delivery’ of John’s birth to his father, Zechariah, an angel of the Lord had said, “You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of God” (Lk 1.14-15). Humble and self-effacing as he is, John confesses to the priests and Levites sent by the hierarchs: “I am *not* the Messiah” (v.20). Moreover, revealing his own identity, he negates two widely prevalent Jewish conceptions of who the Messiah was expected to be—No, he is neither Elijah (see Mal 4:5) nor a Moses-like prophet (see Deut 18:15,18) but a forerunner of the Christ. He is portrayed as “.... a witness to testify to the light He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light” (vv.7-8). When the sun rises, doesn’t the moon fade away? This is John the Baptist’s Spirit-given mission, much as it is yours and mine: to be lamps leading to the Light of the world: Jesus Christ.

Linking the Psalm to the Theme:

Today’s psalm is from Mary’s song of praise, the *Magnificat*, from the gospel according to Luke (1:46-56). The response, “My soul shall exult in my God” and the verse: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour ...” once again puts the focus on God, not Mary, who is herself mindful of being God’s lowly handmaid. Like John the Baptist and his parents, Mary is full of the Holy Spirit in proclaiming the joy that comes from the salvation wrought by God. She heralds a reversal of history where God “has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”

Pope Francis’ Apostolic Letter *Patris Corde* announcing the ‘Year of Saint Joseph’:

“One hundred and fifty years after his proclamation as *Patron of the Catholic Church* by Blessed Pius IX (8 December 1870), I would like to share some personal reflections on this extraordinary figure [St Joseph], so close to our own human experience..... My desire to do so increased during these months of pandemic, when we experienced, amid the crisis, how our lives are woven together and sustained by ordinary people, people often overlooked. ... Doctors, nurses, storekeepers and supermarket workers, cleaning personnel, caregivers, transport workers, men and women working to provide essential services and public safety, volunteers, priests, men and women religious, and so very many others. They understood that no one is saved alone... How many people daily exercise patience and offer hope, taking care to spread not panic, but shared responsibility. How many fathers, mothers, grandparents and teachers are showing our children, in small everyday ways, how to accept and deal with a crisis by adjusting their routines, looking ahead and encouraging the practice of prayer. How many are praying, making sacrifices and interceding for the good of all. Each of us can discover in Joseph – the man who goes unnoticed, a daily, discreet and hidden presence – an intercessor, a support and a guide in times of trouble. Saint Joseph reminds us that those who appear hidden or in the shadows can play an incomparable role in the history of salvation.”

In Lighter Vein: A guru once revealed the route by which he was led to God-realization. “First,” he said, “God took me to the Land of Action and after many years to the Land of Sorrows.” He continued, “Then, I was taken to the Land of Love where I was emptied of everything; next, God took me to the Land of Silence, where I pondered the mysteries of life.” The impatient disciples asked, “What was the final stage?” The guru replied, “God finally said that I’d see God’s innermost Self, and, God led me to the Land of Joy.” Rejoice, anointed ones!
