

Gaudete Sunday 2020

We are certainly in a time of *expectation*, both personal and communal, as we approach Christmas and a new year:

- children feel it first and most keenly: just 13 sleeps to Xmas!
- but we feel it too: of course the shops are decked out, perhaps you have received a few cards; if you are better organised than I am you may even have sent a few....

On the other hand, Christmas can be a time of apprehension, too.

- People who have lost a loved one often find the first Christmas after the loss their loneliest.
- People without a job, or have lost a business in the shutdown we have just come through, may be fearful of their future;
- internationally, too, there are expectations, good and bad:
 - in Britain and the USA, the “big stories” of Brexit and of a new President are overshadowed by the spectre of coronavirus;
 - there is war and oppression in so many places, often afflicting the world’s poorest;
 - At home, of course, while we let out a sigh of relief as the restrictions have lifted, we remain apprehensive of further outbreaks, and are just becoming aware that another fire season has begun in Queensland.

Can we find room for joy on this *Gaudete* Sunday, despite our apprehensions?

In his encyclical *Spe Savi – With hope of salvation* – Pope Benedict addressed this type of question about ten years ago. (It’s a beautiful encyclical to read in full, by the way, especially in Advent time. Just Google “Pope Benedict – encyclical on hope) and you should find it.

The Pope notes that the success of the scientific revolution meant that many people transferred our hope for salvation from faith in God to faith in science. They did not then necessarily abandon or oppose faith, but they *privatised* it. From at least 18th century we see this idea: that my job is to ensure the salvation of my soul, and the Church’s job it to help me do it by offering the sacraments, prayers etc. The Church should keep to the sacristy and sanctuary ... It’s a view proffered by politicians from time to time ...

But the Christian faith has always been a public, shared, common thing. No-one can be a Christian and be indifferent to the fate of others nor the common fate of humanity.

On the other hand, faith is not just about this world either. Faith, Hope and Charity together give meaning to what we hope for. Who has not experienced the disappointment that comes from putting all our hope in some material thing? The new game, new car, new house ... *then* I'll be happy. We acquire the desired object ... but soon we are looking for something else. Only our Faith places our legitimate desires for human progress in the context of our journey towards the next life, towards communion with Jesus Christ and perfect joy.

The entrance antiphon of today's Mass gives this Sunday the traditional name of *Gaudete* Sunday – Rejoice Sunday. The text focusses our attention on that Gift of the Holy Spirit we call “Joy”.

Joy is not a word we use a lot in English. We more often talk about happiness or pleasure – yet somehow we know that we need this word, which speaks of something deeper than pleasure and yet more intensely felt than happiness.

Generally, we may say that *happiness* is the antonym of *sadness*, whereas *joy* is the antonym of *sorrow*.

Theologically speaking, *joy* is defined as a state of satisfaction that we have when we have attained, received or gained something. We speak of the *en-joy-ment* of something good achieved or received. To take a trivial example, let us imagine a ride on a roller coaster at a fair. We are already happy at the mere expectation of the ride; pleasure is what we experience as we have the exhilaration of the ride itself, and joy is what we feel afterwards, as we re-live the thrills in our memory and no doubt excitedly recount them to our friends.

It may seem curious, then, that we use these texts urging us to rejoice in Advent time, when we are just preparing for the coming of the Saviour. But of course we know full well that Christ was born in Bethlehem two thousand years ago. What we experience in Advent and Lent is not the actual lead-up to the events of the Incarnation and Redemption, but a vivid reflection on them and a preparation for their celebration. It is indeed akin to the satisfaction after the roller-coaster ride, when we reflect on, rejoice in and share that experience with others.

It is our certainty that our salvation has been won for us – our joy – that makes it possible for us to accept suffering and misfortune with equanimity and even joy. Joy does not remove suffering, but it places it in perspective. It allows us to keep our eyes

fixed on what cannot be taken from us, neither by the devil nor by any human oppressor nor any sickness or natural disaster: the promise of the world to come, the eternal heritage store up for us in the heavens. It was this which sustained the martyrs, it is this which sustains those persecuted for their faith today.

And indeed it was the joy which sustained John the Baptist who knew that the day of the Lord was near, the Day of the One whose bootstrap he did not feel worthy to tie, but the one who not only frees us from our sins but offers us that intimacy of friendship such that he tells us, “I no longer call you servants, but friends.”

This is the extraordinary truth of the incarnation, of God-become-Man, and this is the source of our joy.

*St Dominic's, Camberwell
12 December, 2020*