

The Third Sunday of Advent December 13, 2020

On this Third Sunday of Advent, as Christmas Day draws closer, the Church around the world focuses on joy.

Joy is a hallmark of the Christian life. St Paul calls it one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit. That is, those who live spiritual lives grounded in Christ will project joy. Christian joy is more than mere happiness, contentment, or even optimism. Rather, it is a deep, abiding sense that we are loved by God - loved more than we could ever hope for or imagine. That confidence that we are loved then makes our hearts overflow with joy.

Today's readings speak about this joy that we are called to and how we can experience it in our own lives.

One example is today's Responsorial Psalm. Actually, it is not taken from the Book of Psalms but from the Gospel of Luke. It is Mary's song of joy when she goes to visit her cousin, Elizabeth. Mary has just received the news that she is pregnant with the Messiah, and she cannot stop singing the praises of God who "looked with favor on her", who "did great things for her," and who "fills the hungry with good things".

Mary teaches us that joy comes from remembering and proclaiming the great things God has done for us.

In our lives as followers of Christ, it is important that we call to mind continually all the great things God has done for us. It might be as simple as thanking God for our health or for the beauty of a sunny day. It might be as profound as a prayer that was answered or for the gift of our faith. The truth is that God is constantly at work in our lives in big and small ways. He is not a God who stands on the sidelines but one who is intimately involved in our world. We just have to open our eyes to see it. The more we make it a point of recognizing God's handiwork in our lives, the more of it we will notice and the more joy we will have as a result. So, if we want more joy in our lives, then we need to follow the example of Mary and sing the praises of the God who "does great things for us."

The second lesson we learn from today's reading is that joy is a decision. St Paul teaches us this when he writes in the second reading, "Rejoice always!" Joy is not something that just happens to us. It is not a mood that comes and goes. Rather, it is a decision we make every minute of every day to recognize that whatever may be going on around us or within us, God is in control and He will make all things work for our good. That is why St Paul goes on to say, "In all circumstances give thanks, for this is the will of God for you." So, we give thanks when the weather is gloomy as well as when it's sunny. We give thanks when we are feeling sad and when we are feeling happy.

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That is the secret of joy. It is a decision we make to see the good in all things, and to hope in the God who is faithful.

John the Baptist teaches us the third lesson about joy today. Joy comes from keeping ourselves focused on Jesus Christ.

By all accounts, John the Baptist was an intense person. He understood that he was called to prepare Israel for the Messiah. That mission consumed him. Above all things, John the Baptist knew who he was. His identity was grounded in Jesus Christ. That is why, when the people questioned him, he was quick to say that he was not the Christ, not Elijah, and not a prophet. He didn't want the focus to be on him. He didn't want the spotlight. Rather, he wanted to point them to Jesus. Only when they knew Jesus would they understand who John the Baptist was.

The same is true for us. We will never fully understand who we are until we see ourselves in relationship to Jesus Christ. Our fullest identity is that we are sons and daughters of God through Jesus. And the most meaningful thing we can do as sons and daughters of God is point Jesus out to others as John the Baptist did. When we see ourselves as we truly are - in the light of God's love for us made manifest in Jesus - then we will experience joy.

The world tells us that fulfillment comes from indulging ourselves, from asserting ourselves, and from building up our self-esteem. But that is not what the Bible tells us. True joy comes from forgetting ourselves and looking toward God. It comes from denying ourselves to serve others. Ultimately, it comes from giving God the first place in our lives.

As Christians, we are called to radiate joy. It is a joy that comes from praising God for all the great things He has done for us. It is a decision we make every day to believe that He loves us no matter what challenges we may be facing. And it is the result of living for Him rather than for ourselves.

At this Mass, the source of our joy - Jesus Christ - gives Himself to us in Holy Communion. Let us ask Him to increase the joy in our hearts so that we can bring it into a dark, cold world that is longing for hope and good news.