

Sermon preached by Fr Chris

*'Rejoice in the LORD always; again I will say, Rejoice.'* (1) Paul's letter to the Philippians is full of 'Joy' - 'Joy to the Lord'. He begins – *'I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy .. for all of you.'* It's a lovely phrase to use as a greeting or farewell bidding. *'All joy in the Lord be with you.'*

The third Sunday of Advent is known as Gaudate Sunday – *'Gaudate'* means *'Rejoice!'* Perhaps not the sort of phrase that readily springs to mind in the present world situation, but one that we should acknowledge today as we go well past the midpoint of this penitential season of Advent. My stole is rose coloured – the grand royal Advent purple, becomes this gorgeous pink colour for today only - heralding the switch on Christmas Night to glorious gold.

This week we will use the great O antiphons at our daily offices. The special names of the Saviour.

*O Sapientia, Wisdom, Adonai, Root of Jesse, Key of David, Morning Star, King of the Nations, Emmanuel – 'God with us.'*

Advent – *Adventus* – **THE COMING! REJOICE!** –As we approach the Altar in this service the noise of our everyday lives should be blocked out, and the word – *'Gaudate!'* should fill our being – God as a new born, vulnerable tiny child is coming to us. Christian people need not be anxious people . There is much talk today about *WELLBEING*. We need not be anxious - because the LORD is near.

*'The Lord is near to those who call upon him, \* to all who call upon him faithfully.'* (2) Our Old Testament psalms have told us this for many centuries but a week on Tuesday on Christmas Night, as the babe arrives the Word will be made Flesh. One of this last week's antiphons was *'Look to the East, O Jerusalem, and see the glory that is coming from God.'* In Godly Play language *'Come close to God, and God will come close to you.'*

When you greet the bambino in the Crib at Midnight Mass or on Christmas Morning say a simple silent prayer *'Lord Jesus welcome'* and in making that prayer, try to let all your anxieties go, as you greet that newborn child who is also our kind and generous God, and let God's Peace replace your human anxiety. We will then be able to remain steadfast in our discipleship whatever comes to trouble us.

Giving thanks for God's great goodness will also help to create that Peace which we all need, feeling in our hearts how wonderfully God cares for each and every one of us. I have a short text in my Christmas note book that was in a card a couple or so years ago. From St Ephraim, the Syrian –

*'Blessed be the Newborn - Who today made humanity young again.'*

And so to today's third Advent theme – HEAVEN ! In John Bunyan's book *'The Pilgrim's Progress'* Mr Valiant-for-Truth's earthly journey comes to an end. *'So he passed over, and all the trumpets sounded for him on the other side'* . Classic FM are currently playing, during the middle of the night, the music of Andre Rieu, one of my favourite popular musicians. His new album is entitled *'The Sound of Heaven.'* It features *'Nearer my God to Thee'*, The *'Humming Chorus'* from *Madame Butterfly'*, *'You raise me up'* and *'Somewhere over the Rainbow'* to mention just a few. But what I wonder would your Sounds of Heaven be? In fact, I wonder, what is your idea of heaven?

A swimming buddy who I meet for coffee and deep conversation was with me this week and in the light of this pulpit commitment I introduced the subject of HEAVEN to our discussion! *'I don't know about heaven Chris, he said, but I know that CHRISTMAS is some peoples' idea of HELL!'* I wonder ....but that must wait for Fr Robert, next week. So, HEAVEN?

Someone close to me suggested that her idea of heaven was a large bed, lots of pillows and a good book, with the just the cat for company! I would opt for something different!

But as responsible Christian folk how should we answer this question, the answer to which we don't know. But we would opt for war to stop, for the little children to be properly looked after and for obscene violence to become a thing of the past.

We would also be active players contributing our part in helping good things to happen.

Desmond Tutu used to talk about *'Jesus's Secret of Happiness'* - *God's dream of a world where all the children of God are loved and cared for and no one is left out. 'Blessed are you who are poor, for all God's world is yours. Blessed are you who are hungry, for God will feed you. Blessed are you who are sad, for God will comfort you and you will laugh again.'* .. *'You are the light of the world. Shine!'* (3)

There's a lot more and it's called the Sermon on the Mount!

If we go to the Gospels again, we find Matthew writing about Jesus praying -

*'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.'* (4)

Matthew always talks about the *Kingdom of Heaven*. Mark and Luke choose the *Kingdom of God*. Heaven and God are interchangeable between the three Gospels. The phrase *'on earth as it is in heaven'* is very important.

In contrast, John chooses to talk about *'Eternal Life'*. John's view of Heaven is that it is a relationship, with the love between the Father and the Son being open also to those who trust and love Jesus.

Jesus said *'In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live.'* (5)

All of that seems a long way from the Baptist's cry in today's Gospel *'you nest of vipers'* – not much heavenly peace and joy in John's message in the Wilderness. Both John and Jesus see this as a time of decision and separation. But, while John sees it as a time of the destruction of sinners – the chaff burnt in the fire, Jesus sees it as a time when God's loving kindness, his mercy, goes out to sinners and brings them into the fold.

Meanwhile in the background to our Advent readings and discussions we can see Mary, heavily pregnant. She will give birth to her child in a stable and follow her son's life, only as a mother can. She will become at home only where God is, throughout her life.

Yesterday we remembered St John of the Cross, a Carmelite teacher and poet in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. However, it was another John that I have turned to for inspiration to describe the Nativity.

John Chrysostom, a Father of the Church in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century wrote this *'Bethlehem this day resembles heaven: hearing from the stars the singing of angelic voices and, in place of the sun, enfolds within itself on every side the Sun of Justice.'*

So, as we continue to ponder these great mysteries of our Faith, later in the year in August, we can look forward to celebrating Mary's earthly passing and imagine her journey from this world to the next, at her Assumption, to be crowned by her risen Son as the Queen of Heaven.

*'Regina Coeli'* - *'Joy to thee O Queen of Heaven, He whom thou was meet to bear. As he promised has arisen, Pour for us to God thy prayer.'*

May your prayers and your reflections about HEAVEN in the coming days be illuminated by Our Most Blessed Lady, St Mary.

1. Philippians 4
2. Ps145.19
3. Luke 6
4. Matthew 6
5. John 14