

Beloved in Christ, the third Sunday of Advent is called **Gaudete Sunday**, which simply means **Rejoice Sunday**! Thus, we turn to Paul's proclamation: "**Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say, rejoice...**the Lord is at hand" (Phil 4:4-5). These words, taken from St. Paul's letter to the Philippians, give this Sunday the liturgical name "**Gaudete Sunday**". St. Paul admonished the Philippians to rejoice because they have moved from darkness into light by practicing virtues such as unselfishness and gratitude in the light of the nearness of the Lord. The adverb "**rejoice**" is often used as a signal of closing a letter, or good-bye or farewell message (confer Phi.4:8; 2Cor.13:11). The prophet Zephaniah also speaks of the return of a sinful nation to God as an event of mutual joy. The people rejoice when they are reconciled with God. Today's liturgy urges us to rejoice because the birth of the Lord is approaching: in fact, we are left with only 9 days for us to celebrate Christmas.

The prophet Zephaniah's message for us is "Do not fear"; Israel's God is so close, as He is actually already "in your midst". Even more striking perhaps is the assurance that the Lord God "will renew you by his love" and "will dance with shouts of joy for you" (Zep.3:14). Scripture is constantly challenging our image of God. Likewise, St. Paul insists in the Second Reading, from Philippians 4:4-7, that his community rejoice. Joy stems above all from a sense of being loved. In the Christian community, the experience of the Spirit is essentially a sense that one is loved by God and lovingly grasped within God's saving work. In the opinion of St. Paul, we will find our happiness, firstly, "in the Lord." We will find our happiness by living the Christian life. St. Paul does not tell us to wait until we have all our ducks in a row. He says, "Rejoice always." Fortunately, St. Paul explains how to do it. The first thing he says is to pray. When things go wrong, especially when they fall apart. So pray without ceasing. The second step to joy is gratitude. Paul says, "In all circumstances give thanks"(1Thes.5:16-18).

In today's Gospel, John the Baptist defines his ministry and that of Christ, the Messiah. According to John the Baptist, he has come to prepare the people through baptism of repentance for them to meet Christ, the Messiah. As John the Baptist whet the people's appetite and expectation for the Messiah, they were ready to do whatever he tells them. Therefore, John offers them three concrete suggestions, addressed to three distinct groups: The Crowds, Tax Collectors and Soldiers. A few Lukan themes appear beneath the advice in each case: **nothing to hinder one's relationship with God, nothing to dehumanize human beings and to ruin one's life in the community, and detachment from wealth and possessions.** In other words: they **should love one another** by sharing their personal resources. Two, they should **treat people with respect and honor** and finally, they should **be content** with whatever they have.

Deflecting people's expectation away from the idea that John the Baptist himself might be the Messiah, John points to the distinction between his role and that of the Messiah to come. He baptizes with water – a simple ritual for repentance. The Messiah will baptize "**with the Holy Spirit and fire**". On the authority of the Early Christians, the "**Holy Spirit and fire**" must have been understood in the light of the fire's symbolism at the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost (Acts 2:3-4). Again, the "Holy Spirit and fire" can also be the **purifying and refining** characteristic as found in Ezekiel 36:25-27 and Malachi 3:2-3. John's final description of the Messiah's mission evokes the vivid image of wielding a winnowing fan to separate wheat from chaff. In fact, Jesus' ministry was "**to seek and to save what was lost**" (Lk19:10). That is why Jesus heals, and forgives, and warns, but he will come again to judge the living and the dead.

Finally, dear friends, today's readings remind us that true joy and happiness is to be found only in God. God is the answer to all our problems. Only in God can we find true joy and happiness. Those who abandon God are on the road to sorrow and pain. Let us pray in this Mass for the grace to understand our Christian calling, like John the Baptist, **by loving one another, by sharing our resources with them, by treating people with dignity and respect, by praying always and by being content with whatever we have** so that our hearts may be blameless before God in order for us to enter into His Kingdom. Amen!