

## Advent 3

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-end, 1 Thessalonians 5: 16-24 and John 1: 6-8, 19-28

### Mother Emma

Every year on the third Sunday of Advent, there are those who are puzzled and confused by the lighting of a pink or rose-coloured candle on the Advent wreath. They, perhaps quite reasonably, find it hard to understand why the pretty pink candle is not lit next Sunday, when we remember the Virgin Mary among those who point the way to Christ, but rather this Sunday when we commemorate the wild and intimidating figure of John the Baptist, the subject of today's wreath prayer, collect and Gospel reading.

There are many layers to the liturgical traditions of Advent, which come from East and West, from different branches and denominations of the Christian church; some very ancient, and others much more recent. The figures who point the way to Jesus, the patriarchs and prophets, John the Baptist and Mary, who are marked by our Advent candles, are a relatively modern way of commemorating Advent, which helps us to prepare for the coming of Christ.

But from the fourth century of the Christian church – and still today in the Eastern Orthodox churches, the Sundays of Advent are part of a fast similar to Lent, during which Christians are called to penitence in preparation for the feast and thanksgiving of Christmas. This fast was lightened a little in the Western church on the third Sunday, on which the priests and altar may also be dressed in rose-pink, a day of joy and rejoicing amidst the solemnity of Advent, traditionally known as "*Gaudete Sunday*". *Gaudete Sunday* took its name from the first words of the introit to the Latin Mass on this day "*Rejoice in the Lord always*", which in turn were drawn from the beginning of our second reading this morning, in which Paul encourages the Thessalonians: "*Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*"

As with the candles, people have found it hard to make a link between the unsettling cries of John the Baptist, with this appeal to rejoice always. John reminds the people of Israel of the need for repentance, offering them the physical symbol of cleansing from their sins, yet at the same time, he points ahead to the glory of salvation offered to the repentant.

We are to rejoice and give thanks for the promise of the coming of God's kingdom, a kingdom of peace and justice and everlasting joy.

Our first reading from the prophecy of Isaiah is the one which Jesus is invited, centuries later, to read aloud in the synagogue at Nazareth, and after which he declared that the words of its first paragraph refer to him: "*The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion –*

*to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit."*

Jesus' coming brings the promise of joy – the joy offered to the oppressed, the broken-hearted, the prisoners and captives, and those who mourn.

When we hear the powerful assurance that God's coming will bring comfort and joy for ALL who mourn, with those whom we bear in our hearts, who have died, been injured or taken captive as the result of acts of terror or acts of war in the Holy Land. We pray that God's will may be done, and that human beings and national leaders may have the restraint and compassion and trust to listen and to allow God to act. But it is also hard not to hear that our part in God's purpose is to share in the bringing of joy and hope and peace in the world.

Pope Francis in a sermon one Gaudete Sunday, suggested that this is a day when instead of fretting about everything they still haven't done to prepare for Christmas, people should "*think of all the good things life has given you.*" Even in a time of instability and anxiety, most of us have much to give thanks for – for love and kindness, for food and warmth and shelter, for the anticipation of Christmas – so many things we could share with others at this time of year, so that we can rejoice together. Yet the strange and apparently lonely figure of John the Baptist reminds us that our calling goes beyond simple kindness and compassion.

As Christians we are also encouraged to look forward and rejoice in a future with God so wonderful we cannot even begin to imagine it, that salvation which Christ's coming announces. John the Baptist is sent into the wilderness to proclaim the good news that "*The Kingdom of Heaven is near at hand*", and to "*make straight the way of the Lord.*" This is the joy which lies at the foundation of his life and work – his realisation that the coming of Christ was the first sign of the in-breaking of the kingdom of Heaven. In the knowledge that in Christ salvation is near, John is announcing a real cause for rejoicing.

This is not a deep, quiet contentment, nor is it happy excitement, it is an all-consuming persistent joy which drives him out urgently to proclaim the message to others that they too may share in that Joy if they will only listen to him, consider, put aside their self-orientated lives and open their hearts in repentance to recognise and follow the Messiah when he comes. Perhaps this sense of urgency also lies behind Paul's encouragement to rejoice always.

As Christmas approaches, we may experience the joy of the present moment in many forms, but today's liturgy reminds us that we are also called to rejoice always in God's promise of salvation. Amidst the excitements and trappings of the Christmas season, perhaps we may also find opportunities to reflect on and to share with others, the coming of true Joy, the inbreaking of the kingdom, the arrival of the longed-for Messiah.

Amen