

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice... for the Lord is near at hand”

These words I just quoted are written in the 4th chapter of St. Paul’s Epistle to the Philippians. I’ll read them again: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice. Let your forbearance be known to all, for the Lord is near at hand”. In the old pre-Reformation order for today’s Mass, these words made up the beginning of the introit. An *introit* is that part of the liturgy which serves at the opening of the service – literally, the Latin word *introitus* means “entrance”. In our tradition, if we’re doing a sung service the introit might be a hymn, or if a spoken service, one of the “introit psalms” found in the Prayer Book. There is another tradition in which the introit that is said or sung takes a relevant verse or two from Scripture, ties it in with a bit of a psalm, adds a Gloria Patri and Bob’s your uncle. That tradition, from the older form of the Roman Missal, is where this introit comes from. “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, Rejoice!” or in the Latin, “Gaudete in Domino semper: iterum dico, gaudete.” Gaudete! Rejoice!

I bring this up because today is sometimes known as “Gaudete Sunday” after that first word of the service. Gaudete Sunday is the third Sunday in Advent, in which our *Joy* at the coming of the saviour is expressed in a deeper way. The Church has been dressed in the colour of penitence, in violet, for two weeks now, and today at about the halfway point, comes a little reprieve. The colour of a festival – white – is sprinkled in a little bit to brighten us up a little and let us to see that Jesus is coming, soon! That’s why the candle is a different colour today, it’s Rose coloured. And that’s why I am wearing this rose-coloured stole today. Just don’t call it “pink” to the wrong person, or you might get a long lecture about how it would be downright embarrassing to wear the colour *pink*! In the early Middle Ages, when Advent used to start on November 11th, it was a long season of penitence and fasting, much like Lent, and having a break in that routine to eat a bigger meal and sing some happy songs felt like a big breather in an otherwise prolonged, dark season.

Now, enough about that! The keen among you will certainly know *why* we rejoice today: two weeks today is Christmas day. For those of us who have a to-do list as long as the aisle to complete before then, you know that those two weeks are not very far at all. We rejoice at the fact that our Lord is coming soon! But we must not turn away from the reality of all the preparation that needs to be done before then, too. No, I’m not just talking about decorations, or presents, or cards, or whatever else our society’s customs dictate, but we *are* still in Advent, and we are still working every day to “cast away the works of darkness and put on the armour of light” to prepare for our Lord’s coming! And preparation is really a theme of today’s readings.

These readings, though, present us with somewhat of a problem. How are we to prepare for this coming of Christ? One example that we have is an explicit one: John the Baptist. In Luke 1, we are told that his father was an old priest named Zechariah, who had the frightening duty of entering into one of the most sacred part of the temple and offer incense at the Altar of Incense. Frightening because every now and then the priest who entered into the sacred chambers had life-altering experiences. Members of the priestly tribe would take turns performing the duties in the temple on rotation, serving once every so many months. And the section who was on duty would cast lots to decide who got what job. Zechariah was chosen to enter to offer incense and there he met the Archangel Gabriel who told him that he and his old wife, Elizabeth, would have a Son who would be named John, and “he must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1.15-17). And Jesus in our Gospel reading said that John was sent to prepare the way of the Lord in fulfillment of what was said before by the Prophet Malachi, “Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, Which shall prepare thy way before thee” (Malachi 3.1).

But even John, though he was prepared since birth and though he prepared the hearts of so many, seemed to have some doubt himself. In our Gospel lesson, we hear that while John was in jail, he sent two of his disciples to ask Jesus if he was the real messiah or whether they were following the wrong person. John, like many of the people of Judea, understood the prophecies about the messiah to mean that the messiah would institute a rule that would right all the wrongs imposed on them by foreign government and internal politics. The fact that John had been jailed for encouraging repenting and baptism was confusing, because if he were acting in the interests of the messiah, wouldn’t the messiah’s rule save him from prison? Jesus answered this request by listing off some of the miracles that were attributed to himself: making the

blind to see, the lame to walk, cleansing the lepers, opening the ears of the deaf, raising the dead, and sharing the Gospel with the poor – all of which fulfill prophecies made by the prophet Isaiah. The listing of these prophecies should have likely confirmed to John that Jesus was indeed the messiah.

After John's disciples leave, Jesus asks his followers what they thought of John – only to tell them that he is indeed the prophet foretold by Isaiah, Micah, and Malachi. "Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you" (Malachi 3.1). In the verses that follow this passage, not printed in your books, Jesus says, "if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. He who has ears to hear, let him hear" (Matt. 11.14). And Jesus gently rebukes the crowd by saying "*John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say 'he has a demon'. The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'*" (Matt. 11.18-19). It's a challenging thing, managing expectations – isn't it? We have what we always wanted sitting right in front of us, but if it doesn't meet our expectations, don't we often reject it?

This is not untrue of what St. Paul says to the Corinthians in our Epistle today, either. The executive summary would be that human beings are hopelessly bad judges of anything. In the verses just before this lesson begins, Paul says, "*If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is folly with God*" (1 Cor. 3.18-19). Just think about that for a moment. "The wisdom of this world is folly with God" and "let him become a fool that he may become wise". We cannot ever assume to be on the same playing field as God, simply put. We humans always, no matter how good we think we are, keep getting it wrong. But, we can still acknowledge that all the things of this world are man-made, and we are all Christ's, and Christ is God's. So, the Epistle begins, we have to acknowledge that we are folly, but we are servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Even though we are "unwise", God has entrusted us as caretakers of his mysteries: the grace which he has given us undeservedly, the love which we share with one another, and the power of the Eucharist, among others. And caretakers, says St. Paul, need to be faithful and trustworthy.

But can we judge whether you or I are faithful? No, that's only for God to judge. St. Paul says that even though he has nothing to hold against himself, that doesn't mean that the Lord doesn't know something – because he sees the things that are hidden in the dark shadows and knows the ways of the heart. Human judgement is incomplete, so we shouldn't do it. We are not wise like God, and can't aim to be. But, there's more. Just like John was witness to the promise of the coming saviour, the Apostles were witnesses to the action and life of the saviour who came – the fulfillment of the promises. "St. John the Baptist is our Advent example, for it is our vocation, too, to be ministers and stewards of the mystery of God's coming. It is our vocation, too, to watch and wait. And in our time, as much as ever, perhaps even more than ever, it is required in stewards that a man be found faithful."¹

Fr. Robert Crouse wrote, "Faithfulness to the mystery is no easy matter. The world is always ready with other ideas: ideas for redesigning and improving, ideas about what works best, ideas about what is more relevant to our times and customs. It is not easy for us, really, to think of ourselves as servants of a truth revealed so long ago. Even some of our theologians tell us that we have reached maturity now, and have no need of the old authority; that we have grown up and can judge for ourselves now. Well, it's an engaging notion, perhaps; but surely the evidence of our religious maturity is less than overwhelming."

So what are we to do? Haven't we grown up enough to forget this silly notion that Christ will come again? We think we've grown up now and know better, surely, than those from so many years ago. But no, we are folly humans who cannot possibly be judge of God, let alone each other. The prophets declared the coming Lord, John the Baptist witnessed to those prophets, the Apostles saw the prophecies fulfilled. Jesus told us he'd be back and we best be waiting. If God has fulfilled so many promises to his people before, who are we so second-guess this one *now*?

So this is why we rejoice today. We rejoice in the *sureness* of Christmas. We rejoice that his promises *were* fulfilled, and we rejoice that his promises *will be* fulfilled again. Even though we live in a world of hustle and bustle, of shopping frenzies, of wrapping paper mountains, of skeptics and deniers, and all the uncertainties of daily life, we *can* be certain that Jesus *has* come and *will* come again to be our judge. This is a great mystery – God with Us – Immanuel. And we are called to be stewards, caretakers, of this mystery. And, as our Collect calls us to do, let us "likewise so prepare and make ready thy way, by turning the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, that at thy second coming to judge the world we may be found an acceptable people in thy sight."²

¹ Robert Crouse, "Sermon for the Third Sunday in Advent" (lectionarycentral.com)

² Collect for Advent III, BCP page 99.