

Advent 3 - C - 2

Zep 3:14-18a; Phil 4:4-7; Lk 3:10-18

You may have noticed that Fr. Ramos and I have paused the reflections on the Mass, we will pick up where they left off after Christmas.

Today we pause in our Advent preparation to rejoice. We add some white to our Advent violet and it becomes pink with the mixture of anticipation and preparation and joyfulness. But being joyful is an experience that not all of us understand. We may think that it means to be happy - but Joy is actually a little different. Today I'd like to use our readings to focus in the difference between happiness and joy, and how the more regular experience of joy can help us to get through the ups and downs of life.

It would be a mistake to think that the type of joy that we hear about in the scriptures today is about being happy all the time. That might seem nice, but we wouldn't be humans if we never were sad. We wouldn't know what it is like to be happy without sadness, we would not know what experiences are good or bad without happiness and sadness, we would not be truly connected to our loved ones if we didn't get sad when they go away for a while or die. There are always happy and sad things that can happen to us - joy is about looking ahead through the normal ups and downs and keeping a perspective that brings calm and peace. In Advent we are looking ahead to Christmas, and just like looking ahead to the future can bring a mixture of happiness and worry - the coming of Jesus brings the great peace of the little baby in the manger, and also the reality we hear about in the Gospel: *His winnowing fan is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.* This winnowing fan is a tool used to separate wheat from the husks of the wheat and other waste. Back in Jesus' time they would use a rake to throw the grain into the air - the grains of wheat would fall back down, yet all the light husks and waste would blow away. The grain would be put aside to eat, the other stuff (called "chaff") would be burned up for fuel. John is saying that just as the wind separates the wheat from the chaff, the wind of the Holy Spirit will separate those who will go to God's kingdom from those who will not.

Well what are we talking about this on a weekend when we are supposed to be feeling joyful? Because joy is not about just looking at only the happy alternatives, it is about looking at the truth of it all, and looking forward to something beyond these things. It is about knowing

that amid all the ups and downs, amid all the happy and unhappy - Jesus has provided us with something beyond it all to focus on. It is about not letting ourselves be caught up in the worry over the negative possibilities, but rather to allow the presence and promise of Jesus support us.

When we are faced with the things that worry us Joy is about saying along with the prophet in the first reading: *Fear not ... be not discouraged! The LORD, your God, is in your midst, a mighty savior.* It is about looking forward to the ups and downs of life and focusing on doing the right things as John tells the people in the Gospel who as him *what should we do?* It is about realizing with John that we are not worthy of this great presence coming to us, yet not being sad about that but focusing on Jesus' great power to transform our lives even when the bad things come. This brings joy. Joy is a sense of calmness and peace amid a turbulent life. We can be calm knowing that those who hold faith in Jesus, those who follow in the way of the Lord, those who engage Jesus personally in the sacraments (as we will do in Eucharist today), those who keep working to more deeply participate in the life of Christ - these people have weight like the grain of wheat that is not carried away by the wind. They can have the knowledge that they are walking with Jesus in this life, and can have the joyful hope to be with him in the next life.

I think I saw this best illustrated during a mission trip I took to Guatemala several years ago. One woman had two daughters. They were very poor, the girls had a few meager decorations to make their room look like a child spent time there. The floor of the house was dirt, the food was scarce, and the future looked like more of the same. Yet this woman did not stop talking about the blessing she received from Jesus, she did not waver in her faith in God, she did not give in to despair. She was calm and there was that sense of Joy in her as she reflected on Jesus, on his love for her and her daughters, on the recent blessings they received from an aid agency, and from her firm hope that through the power of Jesus they would be alright. I couldn't help but think about her as I read the second reading: *Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God. Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.* I remember that shortly after meeting her, we the three priests in the group were asked to pray over a sick man in the village. Seeing their hope and peace and joyfulness I realized that these people had found something that we - better off people - could all could envy. They had found that amid even difficult ups and downs - with a future that is looking like it will have unhappy events - the power of Jesus who comes at Christmas can make us joyful ... even if we can't be happy all the time.