

December 15 2019 Third Sunday of Advent

Today is Gaudete or Joyful Sunday. We light the rose- colored candle and use rose colored vestments to express the profound joy of this day, that Christ is near. I have always wondered, why do we celebrate Gaudete Sunday on the third Sunday of Advent? Wouldn't it make the more sense to celebrate it on the 4th Sunday of Advent when we are closest to Christmas? Maybe that is the point. Christ is near to us even when it isn't obvious, even when he seems to be far away like at a time of crisis.

Today's Gospel is a story of crisis. John the Baptist is in prison and his disciples are wondering what to make of this since they were thinking that he might be the messiah. John sends them to Jesus to ask him if he is the one. Jesus reminds them of the works that he has done for those who are crisis. The blind will regain their sight, the lame will walk, leper are cleansed the deaf hear will hear, the dead are raised and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them. These works are things that only God can do. Jesus's words are bold and powerful and they are a message of intense joy that comes from knowing that God makes all things new. Jesus is the one that leads us from a point of crisis to a new way of life.

The followers of Jesus often find themselves at a point of crisis. Over the centuries, many Christians have been arrested and placed in Prison. This should not be a surprise to us since Jesus himself was arrested the night before he died. The apostles Peter and Paul also spent time in prison, along with many of our early popes, priests, deacons and countless of the early Christians. Without fail, in every age, those who went to prison in the name Jesus encountered the profound joy of Jesus who was with them even in the midst of intense suffering.

One 20th century Christians who found himself in prison was Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan. Van Thuan was appointed coadjutor Archbishop of Saigon in 1975 and two months after his appointment he was arrested and placed in prison by the Vietnamese communist government. The suffering at times was nearly unbearable. Long, dark, lonely days. He could hear the bells of his Cathedral toll while in prison which was a painful reminder of his separation from his people. He found some solace in praying the psalms and scripture readings that he had memorized. He sang hymns in his native Vietnamese and the songs in Latin that

he had memorized as a seminarian. Even with this, he often found it very difficult to pray. There were times when he felt abandoned by God. Some of the prison guards had studied Latin and one asked him to teach him a song in Latin. Van Thuan let the guard choose which one he would like to learn. He chose the song for Pentecost, *Veni Creator . . .* and once guard had memorized the words he would sing it every day while he went about his morning routine. *Veni Creator Spiritus, mentes tuorum visita . . .*

The Archbishop was amazed that this atheist man would daily sing about the Holy Spirit while doing his routine. He slowly realized that God was using his enemy to help the Archbishop to pray. God came to him in his prison cell and that is the joy we celebrate today. God coming to us in our darkness in our moment of crisis.

My family experienced a crisis, a horrible tragedy in 1968 on December 12, the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe. My Uncle Dan's wife and four of his five children were killed in a car accident. My Aunt Rose was 34 years old and my cousins were 5, 4, 2 and 1 years old. I was 10 at the time. The eldest child of that family, my cousin, Mark, was at school so he wasn't with them at the time of the crash. Last year on the 50th anniversary of the accident. I texted Mark and told him how that crisis affected me. His Dad's strong faith was a witness to me and was a great influence in me to hear God's call to be a priest. Mark here is what wrote back to me, "All of what you said is so true. From my viewpoint, my Dad's message was that the accident was indeed a gift. For me that was in understanding the good(ness) of God no matter what happens, the revelation of the Spirit in daily life and the very unique experiences and relationships our family provided. . . The accident still makes me sad, wondering what might have been. But on balance it was a it was a gift. . . . Peace to you today as we celebrate our Lady of Guadalupe and the power a tragedy has brought to us all. Never more thankful to be a Catholic."

My brothers and sisters, it takes faith to light a rose-colored candle and believe that Christ is near on the darkest days of our lives.