Dear Friends,

Rejoicing even when our eyes tear up!

Today is called “Gaudete” Sunday because today’s Mass begins with the Entrance Antiphon, “Gaudete in Domino semper” (“Rejoice in the Lord always”). Today we light the rose candle of the Advent wreath, and the priest wears rose vestments, to express our communal joy in the coming of Jesus, as our Savior. Advent’s themes of happiness and hope can annoy someone who is hurting. When you are burdened with the chaff of ego or the weight of anxieties, forced joy and canned happiness disgust the best of persons.

Yet it is nothing but our diminishment, our losses, our sadness, our weight of sin that Advent confronts and calls us out of. Somehow it is the pathos of our own melancholy that must be cheered away. It is our sense of exile, our cramped confinement, the weight of our psychic baggage that must be burned off by the fire of love. It looks like mere utopia. But it is real. The crowds John encountered had, themselves, little reason for joy. Aware of their own need for deliverance, they felt a glimmer of anticipation that he might be the messiah. He counseled justice and rectitude, but the promise that John spoke of was something far more than they might have suspected or wanted: The one who is coming will give them power to overcome all odds! “He will baptize you with Holy Spirit and fire.”

John the Baptist, the stern and uncompromising preacher, translating his message to our times would challenge our superficial attempts at change, demanding that we take a deeper look at ourselves. Obeying the commandments is a good start, but we must then examine our relationships with others. We must mend ruptures, ease, or eliminate frictions, face family responsibilities, work honestly, and treat employees and employers justly. Start where you are, John says. Our domestic and social lives must be put in order. John’s voice is sober and runs counter to the intoxicating voices around us. We must abandon our selfish thirst for consumption, and instead, be filled with the expectation of Jesus’ coming.

In the light of John the Baptist’s advice, we might consider what we can share with others this Christmas. John does not ask us to give everything we have but only to share - to offer a meal to a hungry person, or to visit a sick neighbor, or to share in the funeral expenses of a poor neighbor, to practice active love and compassion, and to have social awareness. Further, we must do an honest job in fulfilling our vocation. So, a teacher should value his/her students and reach out to them, doctors and nurses should treat their patients with attentiveness and understanding, attorneys should be defenders of justice for all, citizens should exercise their right to vote justly, workers should do a just day’s work for their pay, employers should pay fair wages without discrimination, a married man or woman should give his/her spouse the first place in his/her heart, an employee should treat his/her customers well, working honestly for the hours he/she is paid, and we should help the rest of our countrymen by paying our local, state, and federal taxes honestly.

Let us remember that conversion is an ongoing process effected by our daily cooperation with Jesus, whom we encounter in the Sacraments especially the Eucharist. Regular monthly Confession makes us strong and enables us to receive more grace in the Eucharist. Forgive those who offend us and pray for them. Share our love with others as selfless and humble service. “Do small things but with great love” (St. Teresa of Calcutta, “Mother Teresa”). Thus, Christian joy and Advent invitation to rejoice, does not come from the absence of sorrow, pain, or trouble, but from an awareness of the presence of Christ within our souls through it all.

Be blessed.

Fr. Tom Kunnel C.O.

December 12, 2021

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT
FIRST READING
The LORD, your God, is in your midst, a mighty savior; he will rejoice over you with gladness. (Zep 3:17)

PSALM
Cry out with joy and gladness: for among you is the great and Holy One of Israel. (Is 12:6)

SECOND READING
The Lord is near. Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God. (Phil 4:6)

GOSPEL
The crowds asked John the Baptist, “What should we do?” (Lk 3:10)

GOSPEL MEDITATION
Encourage Deeper Understanding of Scripture

“From silly devotions and sour-faced saints, good Lord, deliver us!” St. Teresa of Avila

We've all heard the adage, “Laughter is the best medicine.” In many ways, it really is. When was the last time you really laughed? The gift of imagination allows us to see possible things that are yet to be. Imagine a world filled with laughter. We take life too seriously sometimes. Fear, uncertainty, pressure, negativity, disappointment, and myriad other human experiences can rob us of the joy needed for laughter. God never promised us an easy road, and we do have to take the course of our lives seriously. However, there is a balance to be sought and a possible joy that can be brought even to the darkest and most challenging of encounters.

St. Therese of Lisieux reminds us that, “Joy is not found in the material objects surrounding us but in the inner recesses of the soul. One can possess joy in a prison cell as well as in a palace.” Falling in love with God, who is present in all of creation, allows us to bring a depth of understanding to everything we do and experience. We can more easily see above and beyond things while pursuing the only One who can truly satisfy our hearts. When we realize that God, the king of Israel, is in our midst and with us, there is no further misfortune to fear. We can celebrate the wonder and beauty of God’s gift of joy. It is no wonder that many saints radiate joy and have no reservations expressing laughter. They are happy because they have found a pearl of great price.

We celebrate with joy today with hearts filled with expectation, wonder, awe, and beauty as we ready ourselves, even more excitedly, for the coming of our Savior. Do not fear and do not be discouraged. If you haven’t laughed in a while, why? Something is preventing you from expressing the magnificence of your soul and the presence of God who dwells within. God’s power and presence within us assures us that we are loved and kept in that presence. What more is really needed? Rejoice and laugh in the presence of God! It really is the best medicine and a most perfect way to convince others that God is really with us. “Go ahead, laugh! Live your life with joy and serve the Lord with laughter! Joy, with peace, is the sister of charity. Serve the Lord with laughter.” (St. Padre Pio of Pietrelcina)
The first reading: Zeph 3:14 - 18 The very short book of the prophet Zephaniah (three chapters) dates the prophet in the time of King Josiah (1:1), the latter part of the seventh century B.C. Because the third chapter alludes to the end of the Babylonian domination of Judah in the late sixth century, it is generally considered the work of a later editor. The prophet himself stands at the end of the Assyrian hegemony and prophesies in the period prior to the rise of Babylon. After a series of oracles proclaiming severe judgment of Judah and Jerusalem (Zeph 1) and the nations (Zeph 2), the book closes with an exultant hymn of deliverance for the remnant of God’s people and Jerusalem their capital. This sequence in judgment is something of a prophetic constant. Negative retribution demanded by God’s justice is followed by salvation, also required by covenant fidelity. In today’s reading Jerusalem is addressed in personal terms and called to celebration. She is spoken to in family terms as the daughter of Yahweh (v14). The reasons for rejoicing are twofold: retribution is at an end and the Lord is once again taking up his residence in Jerusalem. Historically this refers to the Jews’ repossessions of the city and the rebuilding of the temple after 546. In your midst (vv15, 17): The localization of Yahweh’s protective presence (”a mighty savior”), a continuation of his presence with the ark in the desert, is repeatedly seen as cause for rejoicing (Is 12:6; Ps 46:6). Vivid anthropomorphism closes the passage with Yahweh seen as breaking into song in this moment of deliverance (v17). The whole reading gives us the same assurance. Fears raised by wars, terrorism, and the erosion of moral values need not prevent us from trusting that God will continue to encircle us with love.

The second reading: Philippians 4:4-17: The entire letter emphasizes the relationships which the followers of Jesus are expected to develop. Paul was very fond of, and confident in, the Philippian Christians because they belonged to the first Church that Paul established on European soil, in the Roman province of Macedonia. Previously, Paul had preached the Gospel in Philippi and founded a small community of Christians there. Having been persecuted and beaten by the Pharisees, however, he had been forced to leave. Now, writing from prison (perhaps in Ephesus), awaiting trial, and with his helper Epaphroditus seriously ill, Paul can still command the Philippians to “Rejoice.” They have to ignore the petty internal rivalries of its ministering members like Evodia and Syntyche, the presence of hostile Jews as neighbors and the unwelcome presence of the Romans. Since all believe that Jesus will return very soon in glory to judge the world (“The Lord is near”), Paul feels the need to bolster their courage. He reminds the Philippians and us that the Lord Jesus is our motive for, and the Guarantor of, our joy, which we are to share with everyone by means of kindness and serenity. He encourages the Philippians to be kind to all, to rejoice without any anxiety and to raise prayers of petition and thanksgiving to God in order to enable their hearts to be filled with the peace of God.

GOSPEL INSIGHTS

Luke’s account of John the Baptist’s ministry contains a number of nuances which are particularly his. For example, the emphasis falls primarily on John’s preaching, not his baptism. In today’s reading, the chapter begins by highlighting the fact that the word of God has come to him (3:2). In view of the impending judgment (3:9), he calls for repentance and its fruits (3:8).

Instructions to the public: John advises people, not to be dreamers or planners only, but doers moved by sincerity and commitment. John tells the ordinary people to share what they have – their clothes and food – with those who are in need. If they are really sorry for their sins, that is, if they really want to change their lives, they will become brothers and sisters to all others, including strangers.

Instructions to the tax collectors: John preaches against greed, selfishness, and the abuse of power and position. The tax collectors, to whom the Baptist speaks here, worked for a person like Zacchaeus (Lk 19:2), a “chief” tax collector who bid for the right to collect taxes and made his profit from what remained after he had first paid Rome’s portion. So, the Baptist addresses mainly the employees of the chief tax collectors and urges them to be satisfied with “the amount prescribed for you” (Luke 3:13), that is, their commission.

Advice to the soldiers: There were no Roman legion stationed in Galilee at this time, and Judeans had been exempt from service in Roman armies since the time of Julius Caesar. These soldiers, therefore, were Judean men enlisted in the service of Herod Antipas, despised because they worked for Rome’s puppet king and strove to enforce the will of Rome, the occupying power, upon their fellow Jews. The Baptist advises them not to practice extortion or blackmail, but to be content with their pay, or rations and provisions.
In today's gospel, various categories of the Jewish population pose the question to John. He answers in terms of a very basic ethic, shared, no doubt, by Jew and Greek alike, yet still seen more in the breach than in the observance. The first general norm calls for a sharing of goods with those who are deprived (vv10f). This would come as nothing new to John's Jewish audience (19:8ff; 16:25 - 31) but it is highlighted nonetheless.

Tax collectors (v12) were collaborators with Rome and were commonly viewed as guilty of such unethical conduct as extortion and fraud. Here they are simply advised to "live by the book," asking only that payment which is just. Soldiers (v14), evidently Jewish, were not required to serve with the Roman forces. They served in the employ of the Jewish administrative authorities in Palestine. They are asked to desist from the recognized abuses of the military. These admonitions of John differ considerably from the radical demands of Jesus required for discipleship (5:11, 27; 9:23ff; 9:57 - 62). For Luke this clarifies the difference in role between John and Jesus, with the demands of the latter related to life in the Spirit. John's ethic is one of fairness and equity; that of Jesus, a call to perfection.

As in all the gospels, John excludes any claim to being the Messiah, the promised king of Jewish expectation (v16). The Messiah to come is mightier than John in vanquishing evil. John is not even worthy to perform the slave's task of undoing the sandal strap. Furthermore, he subordinates his baptism to that of Jesus. The Holy Spirit and fire combines eschatological judgment (fire) with post-Easter understanding (Holy Spirit). For Luke, fire can also be connected with the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:3f). What is asserted is a clear distinction between John's conversion baptism and the Spirit-filled baptism of Christ.

Separating the virtuous from the evildoer introduces, as in Matthew, the image of the winnowing fan (v17), a tool used in harvesting to toss the wheat into the air to obtain the separation of wheat from chaff. This is John's indication that Jesus' era will be one of judgment calling for exceptional choices (Mt 25:31 - 46). As a forerunner, the Baptist in Luke is seen as closely related to Jesus, e.g. preaching "good news" (Gr: euangelizo) to the people (v1), but he is still clearly distinct. Luke concludes the present narrative by introducing John's imprisonment at once (v19), with no specification as to who baptizes Jesus (v21). This careful comparison and subordination in all the gospels would seem to point to an underlying controversy about the two ministries in early Christianity.

1. Who did the people think John was?
   A) A mad man  B) Roman Spy  C) Friend of Herod  D) The Christ

2. What did John ask the people to do?
   A) Share what they have  B) Ignore each other  C) Defeat the Romans  D) Become tax collectors

3. What was John unworthy of?
   A) To become a priest  B) To a king  C) To tie the shoe of the Messiah  D) To offer sacrifices

4. Who killed John the Baptist?
   A) The Romans  B) Pilate  C) Herod  D) Pharisees

5. Locate a Church nearby dedicated to St John the Baptist
   A) Tappan  B) Piermont  C) Spring Valley  D) New City

**QUIZ ANSWERS**


**Any Questions?**

1. Describe your experience of God in the midst of a crisis?
2. What are the moments when you feel the joy of the Lord. What advice would you give to someone looking for joy?
3. Describe what 'conversion' looks like in your life. Does anything that John asks strikes a chord in you?