

### Third Sunday of Advent – Dec. 16-17, 2017

As we entered into the Advent season, you saw some changes in the Mass. We have the Advent wreath; we do not pray the Gloria during Advent; the priest wears purple vestments. All of these are indications of a penitential spirit as we prepare for the great celebration of the birth of Jesus. Earlier in history, Advent used to be 5 weeks long and included fasting similar to the season of Lent.

As the celebration of Christ's birth draws near, however, the spirit of joy and thanksgiving overcomes the sense of penitential preparation. It is as if Christians can no longer focus on being penitential as they realize the tremendous love of God for the human family. Our God has loved us so much that he became one of us – sharing in all of our humanity from birth to death, and in his resurrection conquered death for all of us.

So, it is that today's Mass is full of joy and gratitude to God. This Third Sunday of Advent has come to be known as Gaudete Sunday. Gaudete is the Latin word for "rejoice." As part of the expression of this joy the presider may wear rose-colored vestments instead of purple ones.

This joyfulness and gratitude to God is also expressed very much in all of today's readings.

Today's first reading from the prophet Isaiah is a song of joy. It reads, "I rejoice heartily in the Lord, in my God is the joy of my soul." This joy is a result of God's proclamation of liberty and release to the Israelite people that has returned from exile to find its land in ruins and poverty. The prophet proclaims a jubilee year – which is described in the Book of Leviticus as year in which all debts would be forgiven, land returned to the original owners and slaves were released. However, here it is proclaimed not only for individuals who had lost their land, but to the

whole nation. The whole nation is called to join in restoration of their fellow citizens.

This promise of restoration is not an empty one, but comes to them through a prophet filled with God's spirit and anointed by God. The response of joy is not only from the Israelites, but is the result of God's love and care for all the human family. We might recall that Jesus began his public ministry using this quote from Isaiah. God's love brings freedom, justice and peace to all, especially the poor, the suffering and the forgotten ones.

The responsorial psalm that follows this first reading is from Mary's Magnificat prayer and the refrain, "My soul rejoices in my God", is Mary's expression of joy in the incarnation of Jesus which will bring salvation to all generations. In the coming of Jesus as savior all the world will enjoy salvation and peace.

And, in case we missed the message of these first two scriptures, we next heard St. Paul concluding his letter to the Thessalonians with the words – "Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. In all circumstances give thanks to God." He prays that God will be the abiding source of holiness in every dimension of their life. His message to them urges constancy. Their joy, prayer and thanksgiving should extend to every moment because this is God's will for them. What a positive understanding of God's will.

So we have all these calls to rejoice, and then we have the Gospel giving us the reason for rejoicing. Jesus our Savior is about to be born. John the Baptist's role is to prepare the way for Christ. He prepares the way not only for the people to recognize and believe in him, but also through a baptism of repentance so that the Lord may come to them.

He explains to the Jewish authorities that he came to announce the coming of the Messiah

who will bring salvation to all and that the time is now to prepare. What better reason is there to rejoice and to prepare?

We all know about preparation. We are all in some way busy getting ready to celebrate Christmas, but sometimes this can be overwhelming. We give time and energy to sending cards, shopping for gifts, putting up the tree and decorating the house and yard. We bake cookies, and host gatherings of friends and relatives and attend holiday dinners and parties, etc.

But in all of this, it is easy to forget what it is we are celebrating. We lose appreciation for the wonderful event in which God became one of us and changed our world forever.

As Fr. Don Braukman said in his article in the diocesan paper --- the child Jesus given to us in the manger is Gods final great testimony of His love for us. God doesn't need us, he says. God wants us! To be pursued by a God wildly in love with us is what Christmas is all about. And what a great risk God takes in coming to us, he says. There is no door on the manger to keep people out. The barn has no padlock. It is always open and waiting for all. We are free to come to him or ignore him or even reject him.

As God has opened Himself to us, Fr. Don prays that we clean out the cluttered manger of our own hearts to make room Jesus. Let us not be the heart that has no room.

Christmas will soon be here, but we still have time to prepare our hearts and minds by giving our attention to the Christmas story and letting it fill our hearts and minds with gratitude and joy.

Like John the Baptist, let us be joyfully aware of the presence of Christ in our midst and point others to this presence of Christ.

Where do we find this joy and presence of Christ? As one person wrote, Don't look too hard for joy in things. For joy, look into your own heart. If you find in your heart such things as gratitude, thoughtfulness, love, kindness, a positive attitude, trust in God and awareness of God's love, then joy should be growing there as well. We can get too absorbed in things at this time of the year and miss the joy that God wants us to have – joy that results from his blessings to us, and our responding to him.

John the Baptist models the kind of attitude and behavior that should be ours. All that we do is meant to point to Christ, not to call attention to ourselves. We practice this when we reach beyond ourselves to help others live life to the fullest. Models of this self-less love are still found among the evils of our world. They are found in parents, spouses, friends, colleagues, parish staff, public officials and all who transcend their own self-importance so that others might move forward. Such as these, light up our world as brightly as all the Christmas lights we see. May we with joy be numbered among them. As St. Paul said, "Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. In all circumstances give thanks."