

“Gaudete”! The command coming from the old Introit of today's Mass which gives this third Sunday of Advent its name is “Rejoice”. Joy is the Advent-theme which we explore today.

Pope Francis in the few months since his election has brought joy to the world. From the first shy smile and friendly “*Buona sera*” to the crowds in St Peter's Square he has astonished and delighted most of the world. He has stepped away from Papal opulence to live in an ecclesiastical Travel Lodge, to travel in a modest car, telephone people himself, wash the feet of a Muslim girl, kiss the deformed head of a pilgrim, spoken off the cuff and laughed a lot. A few weeks ago he published an exhortation appropriately titled: “*Evangelii Gaudium*” - The Joy of the Gospel.

It is a call for all of us, all the baptised, to be missionaries, taking the joy of the Gospel to the world. There are many ways in which he wants us to do this – I cannot sum up a hundred and thirty pages in a few paragraphs – but one of the ways is simply by being people of joy. There are some Christians, Francis says, “whose lives are like Lent without Easter” (para 8). “An evangelizer must never look like someone who has come back from a funeral” (para 10). Do we rejoice in our faith? Do we radiate the hope which faith in Christ brings? Do people see in us a confidence in the goodness of the Lord to all?

This is a document which deserves close attention. It gives important pointers to the way we should try and develop as a parish-community.

Francis again and again emphasises how we must direct attention away from ourselves and to Christ. An evangelizer is another John the Baptist, pointing the way of the Lord and the way to the Lord.

John the Baptist is the main character in the Gospels we hear in this middle part of Advent before we begin to think about the child born in Bethlehem which takes our attention from Tuesday onwards. John the Baptiser would not be a model for Joy for most people. His message is stern and his imagery apocalyptic. He threatens disaster and doom for those who do not undergo a change of heart and mind, symbolised by the immersion in water that was his characteristic *modus operandi*. John was phenomenally successful. “All of Jerusalem” came to him, which means he would have been taking trade from the Temple which was the place where sacrifices were offered for the forgiveness of sins. The priests in the Temple were not the only enemies John made. Josephus, the Jewish historian who wrote towards the end of the first century, tells of John's arrest by Herod Antipas who was worried about the crowds John was drawing. Fearing a coup he had John arrested as a pre-emptive strike.

We heard today John speak from his dungeon. His words express anxiety. John knows Jesus. John was probably Jesus' teacher in the period between Jesus' baptism by John

and John's arrest. After John's departure Jesus began his own ministry and at first he imitates his mentor. He baptises as do his disciples. People think Jesus is another John. But he quickly develops his own style and it is very different to John's. John baptised and so had to stay close to water. Jesus wanders around Galilee and down to Judea. He teaches in parables; he heals the sick and drives out demons. In particular he eats with people. Meals are a characteristic of his ministry and the occasion for teaching. John was an ascetic with a fiery message from his watery camp. Jesus ate and drank and was accused of being a glutton and a drunkard. While John preached fiery retribution, Jesus spoke of the Father's love for his children and our need to love one another and forgive enemies.

No wonder John is puzzled. Is Jesus the Messiah? Was John mistaken in pointing him out as 'the Lamb of God'? Has his whole life been an error?

John's fundamental message is expressed in a passage from Isaiah: Prepare a way for the Lord; Make his paths straight". Jesus' message to John quotes Isaiah – the blind see, the deaf hear; the dead are raised. The very prophecies John repeated and fulfilled in part are being fulfilled wholly in Jesus. If John heard the message then he would have been reassured and joy-filled that his vocation was verified; his life's work was not a waste; he had prepared the way for the Lord.

Jesus points out that the people who flocked to John didn't go out into the desert to seek a man who lived a life of luxury. They went to see a prophet who was acetic, whose diet was meagre and his life hard. It is almost natural for us to think that such a life must be a joyless life because it lacks all home comforts. And yet, "Of all those born of women none is greater than John". What a tribute.

It is easy to mistake pleasure for joy. We want to be happy and we seek happiness through material comforts and ever more sophisticated gadgetry, labour-saving devices and wonder why we still feel empty and unfulfilled. As Francis points out "our technological society has succeeded in multiplying occasions of pleasure yet has found it very difficult to engender joy" (para 7, quoting Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*). And our pleasures are enjoyed when most people endure lives of misery. The greatest joy comes from helping others. Francis points to the "inseparable bond between faith and the poor" (para 48). We show our faith by our generosity, and that is the seed-bed for joy.

As the final frantic days before Christmas take hold we might reflect on Francis' third sentence in his exhortation: "The great danger in today's world, pervaded as it is by consumerism, is the desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart, the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures, and a blunted conscience" (para 2).

In the rush may we not lose sight of what really matters – the hope and joy the Christ-child brings to the world, to which we must point as missionaries of Gospel-joy.