

What a week this has been! Between midday on Wednesday and midnight on Friday I had been to 6 Christmas parties! On Tuesday I had the joy of going to Salusbury School and talking about Advent and Christmas during assemblies for all their students. On Wednesday, I was able to do the same at Islamia next door. Fr Laurence did the same with the students of Al Sadik and Al Zahar on Thursday. And as part of our My Move Christmas party on Friday, all our little toddlers and their parents, or grandparents or nannies, came up into church and we told the story of the Nativity and sang a few songs.

One of the wonderful things about Advent and Christmas is that we tell stories, and often we tell stories of joy and hope – even the dreaded Christmas letter is a story of Good news from throughout the year. Most often we tell the story of the nativity – a simple story which has had such a profound impact on the world then and now! It is hard not to have little smile inside, even with all the difficulties that are being played out in our world at present. There is something about these stories, about the promise of the Nativity that invites us to find joy, to rejoice in God, even in the face of adversity.

Today is Gaudete Sunday, the third Sunday of Advent. The word means rejoice and comes from the first word of Philippians 4:4, which was traditionally read on this Sunday at the start of the Mass (Rejoice always and again I say rejoice). It is the day when we light our pink candle, and if we are fasting during Advent, it is a day when we are invited to break our fast for the day.

Today's reading to the Thessalonians also begins with the command to rejoice. In this reading, which is the conclusion of his first letter to the church in Thessalonica, Paul sends words of encouragement and support. Thessalonica was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia and this letter has a friendly tone. Paul would seem to be pleased with the way that they are living their new lives as followers of The Way, as Christians.

Gaudete, "Rejoice always." Paul's instructions are very brief and very general. Furthermore, the verbs are all plural. Paul is not speaking to individuals as much as he is to the entire community in Thessalonica. They are all to rejoice. And when? Not at a particular time, nor only in good times, but always. They are to pray always. They are to give thanks not just for the good things that happen to them, but "in all circumstances." But Paul's call is simple and direct, rejoice, pray, give thanks always and no matter what happens.

The ending of the reading serves as a wonderful benediction for all of us as our celebration of the first coming of Christ and a reminder to keep our eyes and our lives focused on the second coming. We will be kept holy, "sound and blameless" (1 Thessalonians 5:23) for that day, and it is not through our work alone, but by "The one who calls [us]" and who "is faithful" (1 Thessalonians 5:24).

These are wonderful words as we move through this advent season, but also as we reflect on different things that we have happen in our lives. How do we stand firm, how do we rejoice when things do not go to plan. When we had difficult family situation, or our job is not satisfying or secure. It is a challenge, but Paul's challenge is not a glib retort – it is an invitation to be grounded in our faith in all circumstances and at all times. Paul knows that the only way that others will come to know Christ is through other believers – and it will be the fact that they are grounded in faith that will call others. A faith which invites us to be thankful for God's presence always.

If we think this is beyond any human, then maybe we can look at the example of John the Baptist, who we also remember on this third Sunday of Advent. This is the 2<sup>nd</sup> week we have reflected on the nature of John's ministry. In the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), John the Baptist is a prophet who has an important ministry in his own right. He calls people to repentance and eventually dies as a martyr. But in the gospel of John (which we heard this morning), for the most part, he just points people to Jesus. John is the one who has to come – to share the story.

The text for today tells us more about who John wasn't than about who he was: he wasn't the light; he wasn't the Messiah; he wasn't Elijah; he wasn't the prophet." Who, then, was he? He was a witness (John 1:7) and he was a voice (John 1:23), albeit a voice telling people to prepare for someone else, someone whose sandal thong John was unworthy to untie (John 1:28).

John's primary role in this gospel is to show the way to Jesus. Not such a different message from that of Paul. And also not so different from the call on our lives which it is placed upon us in our baptism - '*Shine as a light in the world to the glory of God the Father*<sup>1</sup>.'

John is a witness who *testifies* to the good news of Jesus Christ. Those two words are used more than forty-five times in John's Gospel and are expressive of what many consider to be a central theme of the work. They have their origin in a legal context and, so, imply public testimony to something that one guarantees is absolutely true.

Like the man whose name was John, the church is sent into today's world as a witness. So, focusing specifically on the text for Advent 3, we may characterize this witness as public, certain, and humble.

These qualities are in tension of course with much of our society where religion is either regarded as a private matter OR it is shunned by the liberalism of our age in which we can be victims of our own perspectives: and where we claim that we can never know for sure whether anything is true or not?

John is a great witness and our readings today invite us to consider what the stories that we have to share are? John bore witness to Jesus. Who now has a story to tell of

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<sup>1</sup> Common Worship Service of Baptism

how God's accompanies their life and what that means? John is right - faith grows from telling these stories?<sup>2</sup> So where do we tell them and what do we tell.

In the New year we are going to be relaunching our 2- minute slot, with a chance for each of us to share a story of an encounter with God – of our own experiences of the mystery and love of God.

There are so many stories of faith that we can share from our past week. We encounter God so often that we don't sometimes see. Can you take a moment to think about your week, and where you were aware that God was walking with you? Maybe it was at your desk in your office, or news of an exam result, maybe it was a conversation over lunch with a colleague, or an interaction you observed on the tube. Maybe it was the energy to get out of bed in the morning when really life felt too much. God is always with us, and John reminds us to take note, to make a difference and tell of our experience.

Telling the story however is not always easy. Sometimes people don't want to listen, sometimes the words are hard to form. There is a lovely line from Harry Potter when Dumbledore reflects that "“ Ah, Harry, how often this happens, even between the best of friends! Each of us believes that what they have to say is much more important than anything the other might have to contribute!”<sup>3</sup>

I was thinking about this a little during the week when I was talking with someone at Laurence's Larder who was quite unwell – I was unable to give them what they wanted they started telling me that I didn't know God and that God was missing from my life – because if I did know God I would give what was needed.

Telling the story of faith isn't always comfortable, nor is it always welcome and even sometimes our stories will be at cross purposes. Still, we are audacious enough to believe that the gospel is true, and that it must be proclaimed boldly -- publicly and confidently.

If Gaudete Sunday reminds us of nothing else it is that we can be grounded in the love of God, and more than that we live it out in a spirit of joy and thankfulness – as people who have a story to tell.

As we turn towards Christmas in the coming weeks, let this encourage our very being – whatever challenges we might face.

For the spirit of the Lord is upon us – and the good news is in our midst.

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3494](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3494)

<sup>3</sup> Page 336 – A Sluggish Memory, Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince, J K Rowling.