

I wonder, are you the type of person who looks at a glass and thinks that it is half empty or do you think that it is half full? In fairness, I suspect that we are rarely one or the other, as it can depend on our mood or the circumstance. I think most of the time we are both/and.

This week has been one of the strangest weeks I have had in a long time, after a seriously crazy year! And I have been contemplating how we reflect on the year as well as how do we plan for Christmas. Do we focus on the things we have learnt and that we are still alive; or do we lament what we have missed out on. Do we give thanks for the celebrations we can have at Christmas, or do we grumble about what is not possible?

I was struck by this as I prepared for Edgerton's funeral on Friday as well – are we happy and joyful for Edgerton's long and full life which was founded on his faith in Christ and his belief in the promise of heaven; or is it a time of mourning a friend we will miss and a wonderful man we wish we could chat to one more time. The truth I guess is that it is both – we are both thankful and sad at the same time.

Similarly, as we prepare for Christmas, we will be sad and maybe even frustrated that it won't be the way things were – but maybe the new things we will create will be more fulfilling and sustaining for us? The danger is that we focus so much on the fact the glass is half empty and what we will miss out on, that we miss enjoying what is in front of us and all that is possible.

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. How do we rejoice in the face of a pandemic, with the fear of unemployment, or when we cannot celebrate Christmas as we would like? It is a challenge, but Paul’s response 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.

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.

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).

In our Advent Study last Monday, the reflection suggested that the birth of John the Baptist is only recorded because who he became. It is what he leads to, his role as a forerunner that means we look back to notice the context of his birth (not unlike that of Jesus).

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 ‘good news’ are used more than forty-five times in John's Gospel and

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

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. The way we live, the way we rejoice, the way we dare to hope in the face of challenges is our witness to the way others see God working in us and through us.

This can be difficult for us – how do we share a message of hope and joy in a world which is full of pain. But to bring everything before God, to have the courage to rejoice in the face of it all is not madness to John or Paul or the early Church – rather it is the sign of courage and mutuality.

If Gaudete Sunday reminds us of nothing else it is that we can be grounded in our faith in a way that helps us live with a spirit of joy and thankfulness.

For within the God's Kingdom the cup is never half empty, and there is always hope.

We are not called to ignore the hardship which many feel at present, rather to allow God to embrace us, to nurture us and find ways to rejoice in God's presence, even more so when times are tough.

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

Amen.