

Third Sunday of Advent, A – December 11, 2016 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 900 words

This Third Sunday of Advent is commonly known as “Gaudete Sunday”, from an old tradition by which some Sundays of the year came to be associated with the first word of their entrance antiphon. “Gaudete” is Latin for “rejoice”, as we sang in the antiphon at the beginning of Mass. This Sunday is a reminder for us that even though we’re in a penitential season of preparation, the penitential emphasis is lightened a bit this week as the end – the joy that awaits us at Christmas – comes into sight. In the same way, we look beyond the trials and discipline of this life to the happiness and joy of heaven.

The entrance antiphon comes from the pen of St. Paul, who tells us: “Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say, rejoice.” He is speaking in the imperative, not making a request. And this command takes on greater relief when we consider the fact that Paul was writing not from some Mediterranean beach, perhaps on a vacation between voyages, or even from one of his trips that was going well; no, he was writing from prison. We might wonder how it is that even from a damp and dark prison cell, hungry and tired, St. Paul can so confidently exhort us to be joyful. But he does, and not only: he even tells us, “the Lord is near”. Amidst the trial of prison Paul knew the presence of the Lord, and this brought him joy.

Joy is a gift of the Holy Spirit and is not the same thing as happiness. Happiness is connected with happenstance – various circumstances come together and dictate whether I feel happy or not. But joy is not necessarily related to circumstances. Paul was in prison, yet joyful. Joy, therefore, is a profound sense of contentedness that remains in spite of adverse conditions. It comes precisely from our friendship with the Lord, as Paul said: “the Lord is near”. The Lord is near to us when we are clean of heart, when we are cleansed of our sin: when we have a clean conscience and are at peace in the sight of God. Thus St. Paul continues, saying: “Have no anxiety at all”: the one who is at peace with God does not easily give in to anxiety.

Perhaps we do not experience joy right now, or maybe we are unsure how to find it. St. Paul gives us guidance for that also in the text from which our antiphon quotes: he says, “in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God”. We need, then, to make our quest for joy part of our prayer. We need God to be the architect of our joy. And by praying, we place ourselves in his presence. But how constant are we in prayer? Do we try to go about it in an orderly way? And, have we really devoted more time to it this Advent? So much today competes with a solid prayer life, and I’m afraid that many really do not give the Lord the time that he deserves. Such individuals are depriving themselves of the joy the Lord wishes to give them!

Prayer leads us to a more profound examination of our lives, and so ultimately to a deeper conversion. I spoke about conversion last week, as we reflected on someone else who was in a prison cell – St. John the Baptist, in today’s gospel. To recap, John had to come to a deeper understanding of Christ’s plan for his life. His mind and heart had to be brought more fully in line with Christ’s – which meant growing closer to him. Thus it is, that our ongoing process of conversion leads us to a more profound joy: we gradually leave behind those things that formerly had separated or distanced us from God and we grow in union with him. Growing in our relationship with God means necessarily growing in joy.

Have you ever met a Christian who puts on an air of holiness and devotion, yet is sad? I’ve met many. They still have a ways to go – till that air of holiness becomes the real thing. But we might also fall into the trap of thinking that joy is nothing more than being fake: like a happy statue with a perma-smile. That’s not right, either; true joy is very genuine, sincere – and it is contagious. It is the fruit of being near to God, no matter how wonderful or how difficult our life

might be at present. It is also a great advertisement for our faith; after all, who sees a sad Catholic and thinks, “I want what they have!”? All of us are called to be joyful, and all of us have work to do in this regard.

Thus St. Paul exhorts us on this Third Sunday of Advent, from his prison cell: be joyful. Do not be anxious. God is near. St. John the Baptist also speaks from prison, seeking to know Christ better. The task of conversion is life-long, and it requires much prayer. We still have two weeks to go of this Advent – two weeks to give it our best shot. May the Lord be near to us now, and may we grow nearer to him with each passing day. May we experience his joy not only at Christmas, but all the days of our life.