



Well it is so wonderful to be here, and to share with you the joyous message from our readings for the 3rd Sunday of Advent. As we move towards Christmas day, the awe, reverence, wonder and joy that Christmas brings to the world, it's a message that encourages all of us on our journey through life.

So let us pray....

Heavenly Father, as we gather together as living stones, part of your Church, we ask the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts, kindling in them the fire of your love.

Almighty God, speak to us through your Holy Spirit, and as we walk in the light of your Spirit may we grow in wisdom, always rejoicing in the comfort He brings, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Last Sunday our Gospel reading was from the Gospel of Mark, and the message was about John the Baptist, *the voice in the wilderness, calling to people to prepare the way for Jesus' coming.*

Today's Gospel reading is from John's Gospel, and also continues the story of John the Baptist, of who he is. When we look at the messages from our third readings and the Psalm, do you notice a theme of joy and excitement?

To me those beautiful opening verses from the Gospel of St John, lift my spirit heaven wards. Don't you love the first paragraph.....

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

And then, St John, introduces us to John the Baptist! We read John the Baptist's self-description as humble and self-effacing, but it rings with certainty, as John knows exactly what he is and what he is not! John knows that he is a necessary part of God's unfolding plan, the one who sets the scene and lets us know what is to come.

There is barely suppressed excitement in his voice as he scans the crowd, waiting for the face that he knows – and only he will recognise. (*You can imagine John scanning the crowd, eagerly looking for the face only he will recognise*). We note in these passages today that:

- John doesn't mind that his work will be eclipsed.
- He understands the job of the herald, both its importance and that it is necessarily transitory.
- John has no hesitation in applying the words of scripture to himself.
- He knows that the prophets foretold his coming, and longed to see what he is about to see.

- John is hugely content to be where he is and what he is. Any part in God's coming is vital.

As soon as John speaks, he brings with him the whole cloud of prophetic witness to what God had been preparing for so long.

Then we have today's 1st reading, from Isaiah 61, a passage full of joy! It is a joy that the Baptist would have recognised and identified with, because it is the joy of the one whose news is for others. The joy of the Anointed One, is in seeing the faces of the oppressed, the captive, the bereaved as they hear the good news he brings. But even this, enormous as it is, is secondary. The real, uncontainable, wild excitement comes in Isaiah 61.10 to 11.

¹⁰ I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. ¹¹ For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

The good news that the anointed one brings is the news that, at last, the earth is to see the full nature and glory of God. Righteousness, salvation, justice and praise, spring up all over the earth because now, finally, we see what God is like. **Wow!**

Now, in our 2nd reading from 1 Thessalonians, St Paul tells us the Thessalonians, that they are now enjoying what the prophets longed for, and John the Baptist pointed to. And they should know it, or if they don't, it's not Paul's fault. Paul is perfectly clear that **joy** is the natural condition of Christians, quite independent of the outward circumstances. **Joy** is the gift of the unquenchable Holy Spirit, whose job is to keep Christians connected at all times to the life of God, offered in Christ.

It is the same bubbling spring of excitement found in John the Baptist and in Isaiah, the welling joy of those who have seen the nature of God, and the unfolding of His work. It is, perhaps, a reflection of the joy of God himself, looking on what he has made and seeing its loveliness. Now things that God created can look at Him, and marvel at the beauty of the creator.

While preparing for the message today, I came across reference to the joy that the three readings is talking about in *The Shepherd of Hermas*, it was composed and written in the 2nd century, by Hermas the brother of Pius, bishop of Rome, and widely read and pondered on for generations. The book is made up of three sections, titled Visions, Commands and Similitude.

In the section, Commands 10, Hermas writes, and I quote:-

"Put sadness away from you, for truly sadness is the sister of half-heartedness and bitterness he that is sad always does wickedly, first he makes sad the Holy Spirit that has been given to man for joy, and secondly he works lawlessness, in that he neither prays to God nor gives him Thanks".

Hermas might have been echoing what St Paul wrote. This joy is not dependent upon

- Prosperity, health, luck or anything external.
- It is based on the extraordinary gift that God the Spirit gives us, of being part of the life and work of God.
- So, like all of God's gifts, it has a purpose.
- In joy, we turn to the world that God has made, and we become his heralds.
- Like John the Baptist, we shout aloud about the coming of Christ, who will bring joy to those who have never experienced it before in the whole of their lives.
- We shout about the faithfulness of God, creator, redeemer and bringer of joy.

1st Thessalonians tells us that the basis of our faithfulness to God, is joy, and that to fulfil God's law, we need to rejoice at what God has done.

That really get us into the Christmas Spirit. **Amen**