

3rd Sunday of Advent

In our first reading today we hear the words, *“Rejoice, exult with all your heart... the Lord, the king of Israel, is in your midst.”* Later in the passage Zephaniah goes on to speak about the initiative God takes: *“He will exult with joy over you, he will renew you by his love; he will dance with shouts of joy for you as on a day of festival.”* This joy flows from a mutual relationship. It is a gift of grace from God. He rejoices in us as his children and we rejoice in realising how much our Heavenly Father loves us. The same is true for Saint Paul. Joy is not man-made but a divine gift. We are made in God’s image and likeness. All our thoughts, emotions, reactions and responses, all that is part of our being, carries at least a memory of God himself. Although sin has marred that image and likeness within us it has not been totally destroyed. Zephaniah’s message is that **God is the source** of joy and peace. Finding the spirit of joy which Saint Paul urges on us is not an impossible task. Being joyful comes from openness to God rather than hard work!

Like St Paul, Zephaniah teaches us that the source of rejoicing is God himself. God dwells within us, and therefore the source of joy is also already within us. He has known us from all eternity choosing parents to give us our natural existence. He accompanies every human being but through the grace of baptism he makes his home in us through the power of the Holy Spirit. God took flesh in Jesus so that we might become through grace one with God. *“Great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel”* proclaimed Isaiah. Finding joy in our faith is about release, relaxation, contentment and being at home with God and at ease with ourselves.

The Advent Season helps us. We look forward to the coming of the Son of Man and the fulfilment of God’s kingdom. Throughout the Advent season we are reminded of signs of God’s kingdom breaking in, anticipating the fullness of what lies ahead for us. We vary in temperament as human beings. Some of us are naturally outgoing and happy. Others are more sombre and serious. I am sure all of us can think of moments when we have been, in a phrase of the writer C. S. Lewis, *“surprised by joy”*. This can happen even at the most serious, solemn or unexpected moment in everyday life, when laughter suddenly breaks in. In our religious life, both as individuals and also as a community of faith, the same is true.

Saint Paul wants us to be joyful. Our Lord wants us to be joyful. God the Father wants us to be joyful. We are not just whistling in the wind. The Gospel reminds us that the one who is to baptise with the Holy Spirit and fire has already come. Christ is already with us unseen. He filled us with the fire of the Holy Spirit on the day of our baptism. Whatever difficulties we face in life we have nothing to fear. The Lord will renew us with his love. We have only to open our heart to the Spirit of God to find him within us rejoicing in anticipation of the day we shall be with him for ever.