

3rd Sunday of Advent

Yesterday morning's BBC news programme had a small item on the healing effects of hope. We know the placebo effect – that an inert substance can lead to the release of chemicals that help to control pain or to heal when people believe they are being given an effective drug. The study contrasted a merely optimistic approach to life which had no such effect with someone who had hope for the future – the context was that of the development of diabetes. Hope makes a difference. Hope is the message that both Isaiah and John the Baptist bring.

'Gaudete' Sunday is like the glimmer of first light before dawn – a sign of what must surely follow. At Christmas time our streets are bathed in light. Yet so many have no idea that this light symbolises our Lord Jesus, the Light of the World, born among us at this time. There are so many people out there who live in darkness. There are so many who are poor in so many ways, even though financially well-off. There are so many who lack real freedom, the freedom to choose truth and love in all they do and say. There are so many who are deafened by the consumerist din around them. There are so many, in the midst of all the superficial jollity, who feel lonely, unwanted, rejected, marginalised. There are people who simply hate Christmas because it only increases their inner pain and deep sadness. They are waiting for a message of hope – a message of light.

Before we can live out the words of Isaiah "he has sent me to bring good news to the poor" we need to acknowledge that the Spirit of the Lord has been given to us on the day of our baptism. We need to recognise what the Spirit has already done for us. "I exult for joy in the Lord, my soul rejoices in my God, for he has clothed me in the garments of salvation, he has wrapped me in the cloak of integrity, like a bridegroom wearing his wreath, like a bride adorned in her jewels." This is what our Lady does in the Magnificat, her song of joy. God has done marvellous things for us if only we stop for a moment to reflect on our lives. What we have to say will only make sense if we have made the connection between our gifts and blessings and the good things that have happened to us so that we can speak about them in a concrete way – for me it would be my priestly calling, for you your family or some gift or achievement. We cannot speak convincingly of the light if we feel ourselves to be in darkness. When St Paul speaks of being joyful at all times he does not imply constant optimism – he knew enough about personal suffering, misunderstandings, persecution, shipwreck, for us to know that he means something deeper than superficial happiness. The presence of God sustains us in these moments too.

Advent invites us to be witnesses that the light is here and to bring it into our time and into the world that proclaims the absence of God. Each of us is "a man sent by God", a small prophet sent among his own and in the world. If our heart, like a lamp, welcomes the light of Christ and looks at reality in the light of Christ and in the light that is Christ, we will be witnesses to the light of the Redeemer. He binds the wounds of the wounded hearts and goes in search of all the prisoners to get them out of the darkness of a heart imprisoned by sin, and to put them back in the sun of his truth and love. We look forward to what will be, not to what has already happened - a joy that embraces not only the Child in the humble cave of Bethlehem, but the One who will come again in glory and will fill our life with eternity.