



3rd Sunday of Advent

11 December 2016

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“Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.” (Isaiah 35: 5-6)

This means so much more than that the lame man will be able to walk again. Leaping implies joy and gaiety. The same word is used in the Acts of the Apostles, where Peter and John heal the lame man who sat begging at the gate of the temple. It is used figuratively by Elizabeth at the visit of Mary: “the babe leaped in my womb for joy.” The prophecy of Isaiah is not just speaking of healing the lame, but giving them a joy which is out of this world.

Walking and leaping imply freedom and release, but it may take time. When the concentration camps at Dachau and Buchenwald were relieved, there was, I have read, an almost hushed response; the inmates took a long time to react to freedom. Restriction and limitation wear down the soul as well as the body.

When we look out at the world this Advent, there are so many places where joy is manifestly absent. We have only to think of those in refugee camps or on the move from violence, or those in Aleppo, for examples. Those suffering there are wanting freedom and release from their situation.

We have heard in today's Gospel how John the Baptist was suffering restriction and limitation. He was shut away in prison. Not much joy for him there, but he was searching for it. He needed to know that his life's work, preparing the way for the Messiah, was not in vain. Was Jesus the expected one? What a strange question to ask, put to a man he had baptised and whom he called Lamb of God.

And yet, Jesus' style was so different from what he and the rest of the Jews were expecting – no thundering admonition to repent, no claim to found a kingdom to overthrow Israel's enemies. This Jesus did not fast, he feasted with sinners. He did not live in the desert but walked and talked in the synagogue and the market place. At the same time, just as Isaiah had foretold, the sick were healed, the deaf heard and the dumb spoke, with as much emphasis on love and trust as on repentance. So, Jesus responded to John's question by pointing to what he was doing, how he was fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy.

A remarkable aspect of Christian joy is that it can be the outcome of difficulties, hardships, suffering and even doubt. It was possible for St Paul to speak of finding joy in his tribulations. This sounds almost impossible till we remember that of a mother who would cheerfully suffer on behalf of her child, counting it a joy to do so, so great is her love. When St Paul was in prison he could write; "Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice. The Lord is at hand." In our country, at a purely human level we have seen joy come out of suffering in the positive way people have responded to one another in the recent natural disasters.

We look forward to Christmas, and the coming of Christ brought great joy. With every great act of his life on earth joy burst out. Angels appeared at his birth chanting; "Glory to God in the highest". And with every miracle and parable joy was the outcome in someone's life. His resurrection, his ascension, the coming of the Spirit produced joy. A characteristic saying of his was "Be of good

cheer". And the early Christians, we are told, took their food with gladness and singleness of heart". Joy was something Jesus imparted to his followers.

In his Letter to the Romans St Paul prays for his readers: "May the God of hope fill you all with joy and peace in believing". Especially that means believing in the reality of the presence of Christ with us as our companion. It means, too, believing that we are following in the path God wants for us. That was certainly true for Jesus, whom we are told in the Letter to the Hebrews that "for the joy that was before him endured the cross".

For St Paul and for us we experience joy because "the Lord is at hand". We may not always feel that in our hearts, but we can be sure, according to his promise, whether we feel it or not, that when we partake of his life in Holy Communion, he is really present. In communion with Christ we partake of Christ's Spirit, and as St Paul says, the harvest of the Spirit includes joy and the joy of the life to come.

Isaiah's prophecy does depend on us, with the strength of God, to be a reality if others are to experience true joy. The words we speak, the choices we make, the actions of our daily lives all count. This is an inescapable personal commitment we need to make and to renew.

Perhaps after all joy is not so fleeting an experience as we imagine. In Christ joy need never be far below the surface. Our consciousness of the nearness of Christ is the underlying secret.

Joy to the world, the Saviour comes.