

### Third Sunday of Advent 2021

Last Sunday I baptized two small children, a little girl and her baby brother. I said to their family: you brood of vipers, who warned you to flee; they haven't come to church this morning! Of course I didn't actually couch it quite in those terms. But what I tried to demonstrate was in the act of infant Baptism, by the very act of parents and Godparents bringing their little ones to the font, there is a responsibility. Not just to teach them to do the right thing, that responsibility is for all, Christian or not; but to teach them and guide in what has been done to them and what that means. During the liturgy I make a point of separating two distinct ritual acts, the first is the act of baptism, the mystical washing away of sin. This is the baptism of John, a baptism of repentance. Then the act of Christening, the anointing with oil of Chrism, baptism with the Holy Spirit and with fire as a candle lit from the Paschal candle is given to one of their sponsors. We can see all this played out today in our reading from Luke. The baptism of John and the baptism of Jesus. The underlying mood is one of Advent expectation, this is what has been done to these little ones; all too often I hear: I just want them to be happy! What is bestowed however is not a spirit of happiness but one of expectation. This is the Good News that John proclaimed.

We have a problem in that we suffer from a diminishing sense of expectation, and on the surface of things there are plenty of good reasons why that should be the case. But I do wonder if sometimes our expectations in many ways have become unrealistic, skewed. Look what John says about the signs of living a repentant life: simple postures of contentment with calling, along with an equitable response to others. You might well say that he was setting the bar a bit low; but it seems to me that this offers us a starting point on which we can build our expectations. Imagine if we encourage our young people to discover their true vocation and be content in it and respond to others equitably, what a beginning. In these two things we can begin to glimpse the joy that is at the very heart of today's celebration. John's simple and yet profound calling to a life of satisfaction in our vocations through treating others with mercy and justice, this is where joy is to be found. Not some passing, ephemeral happiness, which is a low bar; but the deep and abiding joy of a life lived in the Spirit. This is what Paul speaks of in his letter to his beloved Philippians.

What is this joy? Unlike the happiness which comes with gaining something, achieving something, completing something, joy, as CS Lewis reminds us it is about a sense of desire unfulfilled. It is about being on the journey. It is about recognising that our work for a better world *is* preparation for the

coming of Christ; it is recognising that our work for a better world *is* a sign that the coming of Christ is near. The joy we celebrate today is not the sense of something that has been finished but the fact that our desire is as yet incomplete, unsatisfied: as the Prophet Zephaniah wrote: I will bring you home, *at the time* when I gather you. The focus is what is yet to come, based on a life lived in the spirit of what has already happened.

We don't deal with this well. Because we are goal oriented we want to see neat conclusions we believe that these will bring us happiness we don't like untidy ragged edges. During the week I had coffee with Chief negotiator with the Australian delegation to COP26. I don't think I'll ever complain about my job again! We spoke about the intense debates, arguments and the negotiations that went into achieving the communique; hours of work, many sleepless nights. And at the end of it all there was disappointment for many; COP26 had not gone far enough, I know many of you feel that way. So how do we manage this disappointment in way that is productive, that doesn't make us simply throw our hands in the air and threaten to give up?

I doubt that many of us would turn instinctively to the prophet Zephaniah but let's just listen to his words, let's allow this reading to speak to us on this Gaudete Sunday: what we have just read is the end of the book, the beginning is grim and then he closes with this passage. Twice the prophet says 'Be not discouraged! The Lord, your God, is in your midst.' Paul too says much the same: 'The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.' We need to find our joy in this, yes we still a long way from resolution, but are journeying, we are striving, we cannot be discouraged.

For many of us older generations the ramifications of climate change will be minor. But we need to instil in today's generation those words of Zephaniah: be not discouraged, and when they are, we need to remind them of the call to change of John the Baptist. Don't allow apathy to reign and don't be tempted simply for the easy options, the low bar of that search for elusive happiness in ways and places that it will not be found. But seek the joy that comes with journeying albeit sometimes with small steps; as John says, with a life of satisfaction in our vocations through treating others with mercy and justice.

The final outcome for COP26 was a fragile one. A life lived in the spirit of gentleness is too. But the joy and hope that come with it is a valid way of living and is the way of the pilgrim. There's no froth and bubble but the stubborn expectation of joy. Amen.