

ADVENT 3A

Today is 'Gaudete Sunday' and is based on what the angel said to the shepherds; 'behold I bring you news of great joy, a joy to be shared among the people. Today a Saviour has been born to you'

Joy doesn't have a lot in common with pleasure. If not checked, the pursuit of pleasure can become the driving force behind many of our decisions. Compared to our grandparents or certainly great-grandparents generation our tolerance level of pain or discomfort is very much lower than theirs. Winters were a lot colder years ago but there were no warm hubs then. Hedonism or pleasure seeking has been described as one of the overriding characteristic of our age. The danger is that it can cause us to focus too much on ourselves at the expense of others. We know there is a wicked pleasure in sin and excess. We can get at his expense, at her humiliation. They say revenge is sweet but it sours our relationships.

Those who seek pleasure, whether innocuous or harmful, usually find it, albeit briefly. What pleasure lacks is permanence. It's like the soft surface of an unruffled lake – one brisk wind and it's gone. Like December sun and December snow it comes and goes. But there's calm water below. That's where joy resides.

I would also say that there is no true joy that is not the outcome of some struggle, some endurance. The second reading today talks about the farmer waiting in patience for the seed to take root and grow. All his hard work beforehand preparing the soil, fertilising it, sowing the seed, watering the ground ultimately pays off at harvest time. The writer of the psalm put it beautifully: 'they go out, they go out, full of tears, carrying seed for the sowing: they come back, they come back full of joy carrying their sheaves'. Just like the growing seed, Christian joy

takes time to mature. It takes nine months, for instance, before a baby is born but joy is the eventual outcome or at least it should be. Despite the abject circumstances of Jesus's birth, Mary experienced this joy and said as much to her cousin Elizabeth – 'my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour'. Even John the Baptist 'jumped with joy in his mother's womb'. Blobs of tissue don't jump with joy.

Another thing about joy - it's contagious even in our day-to-day encounters. They say 'laugh, and the world laughs with you; weep, and you weep alone. People prefer cheerfulness in others. A person who is cheerful will have company, but someone who is gloomy will often end up alone'.

Before his passion, Jesus prayed that his disciples would share his joy to the full. It's the same in the Christmas story when the angels said to the shepherds, 'behold I bring you news of great joy, a joy to be shared among all the people'. That's what Christmas is all about. And so, we can sing with real gusto today:

*O come, Thou Dayspring, from on high,
And cheer us by Thy drawing nigh;
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
With death's dark shadows put to flight.
And close the path to misery.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel.*

So, we hope that the joy of Our Saviour's birth will be in our hearts and homes this Christmas and stay with us in bad times and good.