

Homily (Advent 3B)

With the lighting of the Pink Candle our attention is drawn from the second coming of Christ to His first. The angel said to the shepherds, 'behold I bring you news of great joy, a saviour has been born to you, Christ the Lord.'

Joy is not to be confused with pleasure. Of course, we cannot live life without a certain amount of bodily comfort but joy is a property of the soul and one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit.

Those who seek pleasure usually find it - albeit briefly. Unlike joy, what pleasure lacks is permanence. Like December Sun and December snow, it comes and goes. It's like the soft surface of an unruffled sea – one brisk wind destroys it. But there is still water below. That's where joy resides.

Pleasure can be described as the artful dodger (*the pick-pocket in Oliver Twist*). It can find its home in illusion or in a fantasy world removed from reality. There is an inverted form of pleasure in sin and excess. A spirit of self-indulgence has often been listed as one of the overriding characteristics of our age.

But joy has a different source. I would say that there is no true joy which is not the outcome of some struggle, some endurance on our part. Jesus, before his death, prayed that His own joy would be in the hearts of his followers. This joy, of course, is intimately connected with His self-sacrifice on the Cross. Selfless giving on our part will be the source of our joy as well. This will ensure that our faith is wedded to reality and not be a passing emotion. Unlike pleasure it will not lack permanence. In John 16 Jesus says that this joy no one can take from you.

. Karl Marx described religion as the 'opium of the people'. He could have a point if people use religion as an escape hatch from facing up to life's problems, or if we see God as someone who doesn't allow us grow up and stand on our own two feet, or

who bends over backwards to smooth over all the ruffles of our lives. If the cross of self sacrifice brought Jesus joy I'm sure it will do the same for us if we carry our little crosses in union with Him. There's no joy in a religion which evades the Cross of self-surrender.

There is even a temptation to sanitise the Crib and strip it of its harsh realism. A homeless couple, a winter's night, a child born in the last place a mother would want - there is nothing here which resembles pleasure. The Christmas spirit is joy and Mary, despite the abject circumstances surrounding the birth of Jesus, was never without it. She rejoiced in God her Saviour.