

Advent 3B

With the lighting of the Pink Candle, the mood of the Advent Season changes from focussing on the second coming of Christ to the joy surrounding his first entry into this world and his on-going presence with us. This joy is also brought out in the First Reading from Isaiah. Hence today is known as 'Gaudete' Sunday - 'gaudete' being the Latin word for joy. What is its source?

Firstly it's not the same thing as pleasure. We can manufacture pleasure. We can get it at someone else's expense. There is pleasure in sin and excess. We can get it at his misfortune, at her humiliation. Of course, we cannot live life without a certain amount of material comfort but joy is in a different category.

Those who seek pleasure usually find it, albeit briefly. What pleasure lacks is permanence. It's like the soft surface of an unruffled sea – one brisk wind destroys it. Like December Sun and December snow, it comes and goes. But there are calmer waters below. That's where joy resides. Pleasure is often the artful dodger. It can find its home in illusion and in a fantasy world far removed from reality.

I would also say that there is no true joy that is not the outcome of some struggle, some endurance, some contest. A less than mature person looks for instant results, instant gratification with no struggle or sacrifice in between. They have a lot of growing-up to do. Jesus, before his passion, prayed that the apostles would share his joy – the joy of total self-sacrifice which he accomplished on Calvary.

Karl Marx was quite critical of the religion of his day. He described it as the 'opium of the people'. He could have a point if people use religion as an escape hatch from facing life's problems or if God is seen as a kind of being who doesn't allow us grow up and stand on our own two feet. Nor should God to be seen as someone who bends over backwards to iron out all the ruffles of our lives. Whereas it is normally in facing up to life's problems and doing something about them that true joy can take root in our hearts. Joy comes from facing reality not evading it.

We can even be tempted to sanitise the Crib. A homeless couple, a winter's night, a child born in the last place a mother would want - there is nothing here that speaks of pleasure. We can even find depraved

satisfaction in sin. But Jesus says: 'there is joy in heaven when a person turns away from sin'. They say that 'old habits die hard'. What old bad habit have you stamped out in your life recently which has caused real joy to yourself, your family, your children and indeed everyone you meet?

Joy is enduring characteristics of the Christmas story.

It's the Holy Spirit who is the source of all our joy - a joy which no person, situation or circumstance can take from us unless we allow it. May it be ours this Christmas and beyond?