

ADVENT 3B (N)

The lighting of the pink candle reminds us that Christmas is near. Today is 'gaudete Sunday'. 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 is not to be equated with pleasure. Compared to our grandparents or certainly great-grandparents generation our tolerance level of pain or discomfort is very much lower than theirs. The present pandemic has put paid to the pleasure we get from travelling, socialising and nights out with friends. But it can have the salient effect of helping us take stock of the priorities in our lives. Many people have risen to the challenge.

We know we cannot live our lives without a certain amount of pleasure but seeking it for its own sake is the nub of the problem. Hedonism 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. There is a warped sense of pleasure in sin and excess. We can get it at his expense, at her humiliation at their downfall. St Paul, when describing the qualities of love reminds us that 'love takes no pleasure in other people's sins'.

Those who seek pleasure usually find it, albeit briefly. What it lacks is permanence. It's like the soft surface of an unruffled lake – one brisk wind and it's gone. Pleasure for its own sake is the artful dodger finding its home in illusion and in a fantasy world removed from reality. But like December sun and December snow it comes a goes.

I would also say that there is no true joy that is not the outcome of some struggle, some endurance, some contest. The farmer waits in patience for the seed to take root and grow. All his hard work beforehand preparing the soil and fertilising it, sowing the seed, watering the ground ultimately pays off at harvest time. The writer of the psalm puts it like this: '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'. Christian joy is not just a passing sensation. It takes nine months, for instance, before a baby is born but joy is normally associated with a new arrival.

We can be tempted to even 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 which resembles pleasure but joy is the enduring sensation of the Christmas story. On meeting her cousin Elizabeth, Mary cries out: 'my soul rejoices in God my saviour'. On a number of occasions Jesus kept telling the apostles of his impending suffering but that didn't rob him of joy. Before his passion He prayed that the disciples would share his joy to the full - the joy of total self-sacrifice.

So let us pray that the same joy of the Holy Spirit may also radiate from us this Christmas and may no one be allowed to take it from us.