

ADVENT 3B

The lighting of the pink candle reminds us that Christmas is drawing closer and the joy associated with the birth of Christ is becoming more palpable. 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'

Compared to our grandparents or certainly great-grandparents generation our tolerance level of pain or discomfort is very much lower than theirs. The recent pandemic put the brakes on many of life's everyday pleasures such as travelling, socialising, nights out and so on. But it also had the positive effect of helping us focus on the many things we often take for granted.

We know we cannot live our lives without a certain amount of comfort 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 perverse sense of pleasure in sin and excess. We can get it at another's expense, at her humiliation at his fall from grace. St Paul, when describing the qualities of love reminds us that 'love takes no pleasure in other people's sins'. But Jesus reassures us that when we turn away from sin there is joy all round.

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 vanishes. Sinful pleasure is the artful dodger often finding its home in a fantasy world removed from reality. But like December sun and December snow it comes and goes but leaves absolutely no joy in its wake.

I would also say that there is no true joy that is not the outcome of some struggle, some endurance, some contest – even some

hardship. 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'.

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 implies hardship and poverty but joy is the enduring sensation surrounding the Christmas story. On meeting her cousin Elizabeth, the expectant Mary cries out: 'my soul rejoices in God my saviour'. We hope every expectant Mum will say the same as Mary. And at the last supper Jesus reassures his apostles of his inner joy as he is about to lay down his life for us and how he wants us to experience this same joy when we lay down our lives in loving service of others on our life's journey.

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