

Advent 3C

With the lighting of the Pink Candle, the mood of the Advent Season changes when we become less focussed on his Second Coming and more on the joy surrounding his coming birth. Hence this third Sunday of Advent is known as 'Gaudete' - it being the Latin word for joy.

Firstly joy is not the same as pleasure. Of course, we cannot live life without a certain amount of comfort but some people have an inordinate attachment to it, especially the wrong kind, which doesn't do their body or soul any favours. There is pleasure in sin and excess. We can even get a warped form of pleasure at someone else's expense – his misfortune, her humiliation.

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. But there are calm waters below. That's where joy resides. Pleasure is often the artful dodger which often its home in illusion and in a fantasy world far removed from reality. But like December Sun and December snow, it comes and goes. But joy is different.

I would also say that there is no true joy that is not the outcome of some struggle, some endurance, some contest. Jesus, before his sacred passion, prayed that his disciples would share his joy – the joy of total self-sacrifice. A religion which bypasses the Cross is not genuine.

Karl Marx saw this as one of the dangers inherent in organised religion – disdainfully describing it as the 'opium of the people'. He could have a point if people falsely see religion as an escape hatch from facing up to life's problems or if God is only there to shield us from the harsh realities of life. Some people see God as a kind of magician, who with a wave of his wand will smooth out all the ruffles

of our life. He can send rain from a blue sky. It's actually only in those ruffles of life that many people find the true God. God will undoubtedly sustain us through the dark times when our faith in him doesn't waver and remains constant throughout. This is when we experience joy. Jesus promised his apostles that if they persevere when burdened with distress of one kind or another, their 'sorrow will be turned into joy'.

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 that speaks of pleasure. The circumstances surrounding the birth of Christ are anything but congenial but joy is the enduring characteristics of the Christmas story. On meeting her cousin Elizabeth, Mary cries out: 'my soul rejoices in God my saviour'.

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 without our consent. May we be filled with holy joy this Christmas.