

Homily for 3rd Advent

This week, the prophet Baruch gives way to Zephaniah, another prophet who probably isn't on most people's list of the best known in the Hebrew Scriptures. Zephaniah's message today really picks up the theme of this 3rd Sunday of Advent, shout for joy, rejoice, exult with all your heart. And the reason to rejoice – your sentence has been repealed. Can we hear that, can we feel that? Well, some of our friends in Nicaragua, who have been released after being unjustly imprisoned for opposing the government, will know what, having a sentence repealed, feels like. As will Anthony Broadwater who was released from gaol after serving 16 years in prison and 23 years on the sex offenders list, after being wrongly accused. And who couldn't be moved by the little migrant boy on Lesbos who told Pope Francis that all he wanted was freedom.

Towards the end of the passage Zephaniah gives us even more reason to rejoice, namely that God is in our midst. Can we hear that, can we feel that presence of God among us today. Perhaps sometimes we can be guilty of looking for the presence of God in our midst only in major events, whereas God can be present in the smile of a stranger, a word of forgiveness after an argument, a welcome cold drink on a hot day. The theme of joy and happiness is taken up by St Paul in the 2nd reading. If we are tempted to think that this might be 'pie in the sky' happiness, we do well to remember that when Paul wrote these words he was in prison. Paul casts a sober eye at the struggles Christians endure and calls for rejoicing even in a world of war, violence, pandemic, genocide, poverty, injustice, domestic abuse, church scandal and more. The reason he can still encourage people to rejoice is because the Lord is near, or to use Zephaniah's phrase, the Lord is in your midst. He knew strength and hope not because he had easy solutions to life's problems, but because he trusted that the Lord is near.

John the Baptist in today's gospel responds to the questions different people ask about what they must do to recognise the Lord is near in the person of Christ. His answers are disarmingly simple. He calls them and us to live good and faithful lives by having a concern for the poor – whoever has two cloaks should share with the one who has none. Whoever has food should do the same. He is calling us to be faithful to our roles in life, to be good parents and honest workers, to treat people justly, not to take advantage of people, to be fair and help those in need. Ours is not an other-worldly religion, rather we are called to join heaven and earth, to be honest, to live with integrity, refusing to use people for our own benefit, but rather treating all people with respect. John calls us to be satisfied with what we have and to do something for those who have not.

John's character and preaching caused people to ask 'What must we do?' And that might be our question as we enter the third week of Advent. What must we do if we are to live Pope Francis' 'Wider we?' We have to answer that question for ourselves and to do so, in keeping with the theme of joy, I leave you with this phrase I came across when preparing for today: Joy begins when kindness and love are shared. Happy Advent!

Bidding Prayers for 3rd Sunday of Advent

Celebrant:

Preparing the way for the Lord's return, we turn to him in prayer for the needs of the Church, the world and ourselves.

Reader:

For the Church – that the Church will help all its members to live the Gospel with a spirit of joy and hope.

Lord in your mercy

For Governments and world leaders – that they serve their people with humility and compassion, allowing them to live in freedom and peace.

Lord in your mercy

For ourselves – that we will believe that joy begins when kindness and love are shared.

Lord in your mercy

For all those who are suffering in body, mind or spirit – that they may experience joy by being shown kindness and love.

Lord in your mercy

For those who have died, all victims of violence, accident, natural disasters and the Covid-19 pandemic, and Janet King, Joan Lally, Agnes Hyland, Veronica Davies, Josef Flaschka, Arthur Sanderson, Jeremiah O'Driscoll, Anthony Higgins, Pat Holt, Ann Barley and Lorraine Ackerley whose anniversaries occur this week – that they and all who have died may rest in peace and rise in glory.

Lord in your mercy

Either aloud or in silence we pray for our own special intentions...pause...then

Lord in your mercy

We ask the prayers of Mary as we say, Hail Mary...

Celebrant:

All loving God, help us to prepare the way of your Son by straightening our hearts and purifying our desires. Give us the humility and courage of John the Baptist. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen