

Choral Communion - 12th December 2021 – Gaudete Sunday - Advent 3

Zephaniah 3: 14 – 20; Philippians: 4: 4-7; Luke 3: 7 - 18 .

Title: Gaudete!

In the journey through Advent and having arrived at Advent 3, this marks roughly the half way point of this penitential season. Just as the halfway point in Lent provides us with an opportunity to pause and take a new liturgical breath on Mothering Sunday, so too does the half way point in Advent. [The observant amongst you will have noticed that the vestment colours have changed from purple to pink to underline this fact, the only Sunday in the church's year on which they are worn.] Today, as well as being the third Sunday in Advent, is also known as Gaudete Sunday. Gaudete Sunday gets its name from the traditional introit set for today: 'Gaudete in Domino semper' which translates from the Latin as: 'Rejoice in the Lord always'. As luck would have it, these words are based on words from Philippians 4:4-7 which are set for this morning's Epistle. These words are ingrained into my memory as a boy chorister, every year we sang the verse anthem by Henry Purcell which set these very words (happily in English)! So, in the middle of the penitential season of Advent, the church proclaims as loudly as it can 'Rejoice, Be Glad'.

This idea of rejoicing also percolates through our Old Testament lesson this morning from Zephaniah. In the opening of this passage, he couldn't be more clear: 'Sing aloud', 'Shout', Rejoice 'Exult'! What is the cause of all this celebration? Not only is there a sense of the Jews' period of Exile in Babylon coming to an end, but also that their relationship with their heavenly father has been healed. Now '**God is in their midst**'. Remember that it was God punishing his people for their lax practises which they believed was the cause of them being taken into Exile in the first place.

What is Paul's reason for encouraging the Philippian church to rejoice? There is a sense in which Paul also believed that the church was in a period of exile which was soon to come to an end. Unlike his Jewish forbears, this exile was not caused by them being in a foreign county but by them living a mortal existence in a finite world. Like many early Christians, Paul believed that the second coming of Christ was immanent, and with that would come the judgement of the world. But Paul's message is that they need fear nothing if they continued to live gentle lives rooted in prayer, showing moderation in all things. For then, the peace of God would flow through them and sustain them. Although we now know that the end of the world was not as immanent as Paul first believed, that in no way negates his message to us. What he advocates for the Philippian church applies just as much to us too. What I find absolutely breath taking is Paul's own circumstance when writing these words. He is in prison and whilst his future remains uncertain, execution is a very real possibility which we know is in fact what happens. Yet his faith, his very deep and rock solid faith impels him to encourage others not to be sad but to rejoice.

Just in case in the midst of all this rejoicing we are tempted to forget that all humanity will be judged at the end of time, our gospel leaves us in no doubt, through the ministry of John the Baptist, that this is in fact the case. In the passage we heard from Luke the emphasis is not on rejoicing but on repentance. John's Jewish listeners appear to have become somewhat self-satisfied. It is almost as though, through their Jewish heritage and their knowledge that they are God's chosen people, they believe that they have a kind of 'get out of jail card' which excuses them from the Last Judgement. John leaves them in no doubt, they will be judged like anybody else. His message to them is very much that of a 'wake-up call'.

When his message hits home and produces the question from his listeners in verse 10, “What then should we do?” his response is very much that along the line of St. Paul in this morning’s epistle: moderation in all things. Because this makes such good sense, people begin to wonder whether John is the long awaited Messiah. He quickly scotches this particular rumour but does acknowledge that he is a forerunner, pointing the way to the one who is the Messiah whose ministry is immanent. It is when Jesus who is the long awaited Messiah comes to be baptised by John, that marks the moment when Jesus’ public ministry begins. Our Epistle and Gospel provide wonderful examples of **the context in which a particular message is preached shaping the content of that message**. If people are already worried about how effective they are in living lives rooted in gospel values, they do not need criticism but encouragement, which is just what Paul gives them. If people have become lax about living out what they believe through active service, they do not need a softly softly approach but a wake-up call, which is just what John gives them.

So what is our context? How are we to share the good news of Emanuel, God with us, **God is in our midst**? Here are just a few thoughts. In a world which seems incapable of waiting for anything at all, we need to reclaim the Christmas Story rooted in Bethlehem from that rooted in Lapland. We need to also reclaim the Christmas Story from the world of pantomime. As with our forebears, we need to live out in our lives what we believe. If we live lives that proclaim that the God of love is with us, that shows more effectively that God is not just with us in the happily ever after moments but in the tough unhappy moments too; perhaps then we can invite those who want to know what makes us tick, just as Jesus did, to ‘Come and see’ .