

Third Sunday of Advent
December 16, 2018
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Reflection

"Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say, Rejoice." The Third Sunday of Advent is known as Gaudete Sunday. Twice a year priests wear rose-coloured vestments: Gaudete Sunday in Advent and Laetare Sunday in Lent. Both words mean "rejoice", but with a subtle difference. Gaudete means "have an internal enjoyment." It's like looking at the Christmas tree when everyone else has gone to bed. Laetare means "show an external light-heartedness." It's like running around the house looking for Easter eggs. We rejoice because "The Lord is near."

The crowds around John the Baptist knew that the Lord was near. The people of Israel had been preparing for his first coming for centuries. Now they "were filled with expectation." The preaching of John had moved their hearts towards repentance. They saw in him the Messiah, but he denied it: "I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals." This last and greatest prophet was speaking in their time, but not about himself. He was making them ready for someone more powerful, someone with unquenchable fire, someone who made them wonder: "What should we do?"

John urged them towards sharing: share your extra coat, share your food. "What should we do?" Collect only what is fair. "What should we do?" Do not exhort but be satisfied. All this points to detachment from things.

Zeph 3:14-18a
Is 12
Phil 4:4-7
Lk 3:10-18

Detachment was a virtue that John was known for, living on locusts and honey in the wilderness. He was detached not just from things but from reputation. He told his disciples, "he must increase, but I must decrease (Jn 3:30)." He even detached from life itself, when he gave it up as martyr for truth.

Sharing, detaching, giving: these paths towards rejoicing are a mystery that points to baptism. Zephaniah says "Rejoice and exalt with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away the judgements against you." His words are fulfilled in the baptism of the Holy Spirit that was instituted by Christ. We might choose through grace to share, detach and give. God has chosen to make us a people of gladness through the sacrament of baptism. He shares with us the sanctity of his Son, making us adopted children of God. He detaches us from captivity to sin, through a sacrifice made once for all that "renews [us] in his love." He gives us his Spirit who dwells within us, so "the Lord is in [our] midst." We participate in the trust of Mary, and "fear disaster no more." With her we can say the words of Isaiah, "I will trust, and will not be afraid." Our baptism "draws water from the wells of salvation," joining us to the sharing and detaching and giving of God, paving the way to receive his joy.

The trouble is, we're used to giving as part of an exchange. At Christmas, we give a present knowing that the recipient has seen our Christmas list.

Sharing is an investment in the future: we surrender from our surplus today, so that tomorrow we can receive in our poverty. Detachment from item A is to make room for item B. When people asked John, "What should we do?" they accepted his answer because a promise was implied. And rightfully so. Jesus makes this promise: "The measure with which you measure will be measured out to you, and still more will be given to you (Mk 4:24)." But what we will receive is in the order of grace.

People look at poor Christians giving their last two coins. They see victims of guilt and manipulation who are grasping at straws. The widow of Zarephath gave Elijah the last of her flour. It was through a miracle that her jar didn't run out (1 Kings 17:16): usually it does. God gives us what we need, not always what we want. Suffering is part of our Christian life - it's the gravel that makes up our path towards joy. Our perfection is by way of the Cross. It's a spiritual battle, won by mortification. Only gradually does it lead to the peace and joy of the Beatitudes (2015). We renounce ourselves to live by the Spirit (736). A fruit of the Spirit is the love of God and neighbour, known as charity (1832). Holiness is the perfection of charity. And charity has its own fruits: joy, peace and mercy. This love of God and neighbour is the fulfillment of our works, the result of our sharing, the goal where we find rest (1829). God reveals this to us because he wills our joy. Then we learn over time what St. Augustine confessed: "you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you (30)."

Once we rest in God, then we have that internal enjoyment; like looking at the Christmas tree when everyone else has gone to bed.