

This third Sunday in Advent is called '*Gaudete Sunday*' – and *Gaudete* means to 'rejoice and be glad.' It comes in the middle of the darkness of Advent as a splash of light and colour, reminding us that the light is soon to return. Used here, *Gaudete* is an imperative verb: it is telling us that we should – we must – rejoice and be glad.

We are beings created for joy. Thomas Aquinas said that if we do not know spiritual joy, we will be drawn to physical pleasures instead. Even then he said that when we sin, God only requires us to regret that it was wrong, not to regret the pleasure it gave us. This is because pleasure is a subtext of joy and to regret it would go against human nature. Joy flows from love, so wherever there is joy, there also is love; joy therefore is an infallible sign of the presence of God. St Teresa of Avila once said: 'God preserve us from sour-faced saints.' This why so many of the saints were men and women of warm humour – St Philip Neri, for example, had an extraordinarily eccentric sense of humour and was known as 'the Apostle of Joy'. In the accounts of the life of St Jean-Marie Vianney, we are told that he was being tormented by the devil one night, who was shaking his bed and roaring and making a terrible din. Jean-Marie said to the devil: 'If you do not stop, I will go next door to the orphanage, wake all the children up and tell them what you are doing. And they will *laugh* at you.' Immediately, the mischief stopped. This is because, as the Irish poet Thomas Moore once said: 'The devil, that proud spirit, cannot endure to be mocked.' Evil has no sense of humour: it laughs, cruelly, at the misfortune of others.

A non-malicious sense of humour can be one of the greatest blessings. Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav counselled: 'If the only way you can lift yourself out of a dark mood is to do something silly, do it.' The path of 'holy foolishness' has always been recognised in Orthodox spirituality. We mustn't confuse joy with happiness. Joy is rooted in a steady, deep-down sense that – despite every terrible thing in oneself and in the world around us – in the end, as the Lord famously said to Julian of Norwich,

‘All shall be well and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.’

Happiness on the other hand, is an evanescent thing – just as misery is – and depends completely on outward circumstances. It is not from within us. Most people in our day and age would consider that spiritual joy is a form of insanity, or at least a hopeless self-deception, like religion itself; but they are mistaken. The true insanity is living in our world like ours *without* joy. From love comes joy and from joy comes hope, strung together like pearls on a chain.

Despite the suffering that life can bring, joy persists, because it believes in the ultimate reality of divine love. This begins within ourselves – everything does – and it is often far from easy. We have to practice it. Henri Nouwen wrote:

“Joy does not simply happen to us. We have to choose joy and keep choosing it every day.”

We don’t have to be ‘special’ to do this; we don’t have to be extraordinary or multi-talented or famous. In fact, it is much easier if we’re not. A contemporary spiritual writer says:

“We must be willing to be completely ordinary people, which means accepting ourselves as we are without trying to become greater, purer, more spiritual, more wise. If we can accept our imperfections as they are, quite ordinarily, then we can use them as part of our path. But if we try to reject our imperfections, they will be our enemies (...).”

To accept who we are as we are does not mean living out our imperfections and weaknesses or simply giving in to them; Oscar Wilde’s statement, ‘I can resist anything except temptation’ is witty but foolish. All we need to know is that our imperfections are there – as God does. For me, with my long list of imperfections and weaknesses, that is comforting advice.