

This Third Sunday in Advent is called ‘Gaudete Sunday’ – and ‘Gaudete’ means ‘rejoice and be glad’. It comes in the middle of the darkness of Advent as a reminder us that the light is soon to return. If it is literally true that the sky is at its darkest just before sunrise, it is also true metaphorically. When life seems to be at its most dark, when the shadows of anxiety or fear, of pain or grief or suffering seem to close in, that is the very time that the light of hope is closest to us, if only we could allow ourselves to believe it.

What is true outside is also true inside. The time when we feel most overcome by our sins, our weaknesses and failings, is when God draws closer to us. The time when we are most weighed down by guilt, is when he is nearest to us. The time when we are most full of irritations, negativity, annoyances, self-pity and criticism – so full that we almost despair of ourselves – is the very time when God’s loving mercy is most abundantly offered to us.

J.R.R. Tolkien gave this time a special name: he called it ‘euchatastrophe’. It is the opposite of catastrophe. He described one such moment in *The Lord of the Rings*: Frodo and Sam and wandering in the land of Mordor, lost and alone, in danger and despair. Tolkien writes:

“There, peeping among the cloud-wrack above a dark tor high up in the mountains, Sam saw a white star twinkle for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach.”

Gaudete Sunday is a euchatastrophe: it is the return of the light, the dawning of hope, the beginning of the sunrise. It reminds us that 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. It also teaches us not to confuse joy with happiness. Joy comes from a deep-down conviction that – despite every terrible thing in oneself, one’s life and the world – 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.’ Joy is a response of the heart and mind to this conviction. And Julian’s century was absolutely terrible: she didn’t have Covid, but she had the Black death, which wiped out two-thirds of Europe; there was no armed conflict in Ukraine or the Middle East, but there was a war between Britain and France which lasted 100 years; the Church’s problems, too, were far worse than ours: three different men were claiming to be the true pope and they were burning heretics alive just outside Norwich. Yet still the Lord said to her: ‘All shall be well’.

Happiness, on the other hand, is an earthly thing: joy is to happiness what the sun is to the flame of a candle. In our day and age, many – if not most – consider that in this modern world, spiritual joy must be insane or, at the very least, a hopeless self-deception, like religion itself; but they are mistaken: the true insanity is living in a world like ours *without* joy, because the first gift of joy is hope. From love comes joy and from joy comes hope. They are strung together, like pearls on a chain.

Despite the suffering life can bring, joy persists; it persists because it believes that in the end all shall be well; and it believes that all shall be well because – like Julian – it trusts in the ultimate reality of divine love.