

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 splash of light and colour, reminding us that the light is soon to return. The third Sunday in Lent, '*Laetare* Sunday', is its equivalent. In both cases we are being reminded, despite the seasonal shadows of Advent and the moral darkness of Lent, that the light is very near. We could call it 'Be Joyful Sunday'.

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. Joy is an effect of love, as heat is an effect of fire. Where love is, there too is joy. Because of this, joy is also an infallible sign of the presence of God, who is love. St Teresa of Avila said: "God preserve us from sour-faced saints." This is why so many of the saints were individuals of warm humour – St Philip Neri, for example, was well known for his eccentric sense of fun and has been called the 'apostle of joy'. In the accounts of the life of St Jean-Marie Vianney, the Curé of Ars, we are told that he was being tormented by the devil one night, who was shaking his bed and making a lot of noise. Jean-Marie said to the devil:

"If you do not stop, I will go next door to the orphanage, wake the children up, tell them what you are doing, and they will *laugh* at you."

And the mischief stopped immediately. This is because, as the Irish poet and songwriter Thomas Moore once wrote: “The devil, that proud spirit, cannot endure to be mocked.” Evil has no sense of humour. A non-malicious sense of humour can be one of the greatest blessings. Rabbi Nachman of Breslov said: “If the only way you can pull yourself out of a dark mood is to do something silly – do it.”

We must not confuse ‘joy’ with ‘happiness’. Joy is rooted in a steady, deep-down, lasting certitude 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.” It is a response of the heart and mind to that certitude. In these days of the Covid pandemic, Brexit, economic downturn and the political upheaval in America, we might reasonably think that there is nothing ‘well’ at all about our world. However, in Julian’s day, things were far worse: the social fabric was crumbling, ravaged by revolt and revolution; three different men were claiming to be the true pope; Lollard heretics were being burned just outside Norwich in a great pit, very near Julian’s cell; and the Black Death had wiped out nearly two-thirds of Europe. Yet still the Lord said to her: “All shall be well and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.” Even in the midst of social and religious darkness, confusion and uncertainty, her soul was

characterised by joy. Joy is woven throughout the text of her 'Revelations of Divine Love'. *Gaudete* Sunday – 'Rejoice and Be Glad Sunday' – affirms joy as an effect of love. It is the chief jewel in love's crown.

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 it trusts in the ultimate reality of divine love. Because joy is the fruit of love, the art of living a joy-based life must begin within ourselves; this is why Jesus did *not* say 'Love your neighbour' *but* 'love your neighbour as yourself.' First and foremost then, we must cultivate joy in our own existence. Henri Nouwen said:

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

And Nouwen spoke as someone whose own life was filled with emotional suffering. Only a heart that knows what pain is can truly be joyful. A modern

Buddhist teacher has observed that to be truly spiritually joyful, our heart must be broken – because without a broken heart and a sense of vulnerability, our joy is incomplete. Jesus himself prayed:

“That my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.” (John 16:24)

And if Jesus’ heart wasn’t broken, I don’t know whose was. Indeed, it was pierced by a lance as he hung on the cross.

So: joy is a characteristic of love; we have to practice it, to work at being joy-filled people; it has nothing to do with happiness and everything to do with a certitude of heart that ‘all shall be well’ – actually, that in a way we cannot at the moment grasp, all *already is* well. And this must begin with ourselves – with a joy taken in the very fact of our existence. We don’t have to be ‘special’ to know this joy; we don’t have to be extraordinary or multi-talented or famous. A modern 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 insightful. If we can accept our imperfections as they are, quite ordinarily, then we can use them as part of the path. But if we try to get rid of our imperfections, then they we be our enemies, obstacles on the road to our ‘self-improvement.’”

To accept *who* we are, *as* we are, is not to live out our faults and imperfections. Oscar Wilde's dictum that the only way to get rid of temptation is to give into it, is the worst possible advice. To truly *know* our weaknesses yet *not* to live by them, is the joy that belongs to the authentic spiritual life. It is the joy that Christ bequeaths us. Joy means that, inwardly, our soul – sometimes despite everything – is smiling. Sometimes our joy is the source of our smile, but sometimes our smile can be the source of our joy.

This, it seems to me, is all held and contained within the meaning of 'Gaudete Sunday'.