

Today, the third Sunday in Advent, is called 'Gaudete Sunday' – which means 'rejoice and be glad'. We are reminded firstly that in the midst of darkness the light is soon to return and secondly, that we are creatures made for joy. It certainly doesn't seem like it sometimes, I realise that – but we were. Each of us was brought forth by God for eternal joy. Thomas Aquinas says that if we are not aware of this, we will become addicted to physical pleasure.

Joy is not the same as happiness. Joy is deeply-rooted, certain and permanent; happiness is superficial, uncertain and passing. Joy is to happiness what the sun is to the flame of a match. When suffering comes happiness disappears, but joy persists. Astonishingly, joy can remain beneath all pain and suffering. In fact, it can make pain and suffering bearable, because it doesn't draw its life from anything beyond itself: there *is* nothing beyond itself because it is of God.

When I was a young man, in my last year of secondary school, I was having a few more issues than most of my peers; I was, you could say, troubled. A kindly schoolmaster noticed this and took me to see a woman who – although I did not know it at the time – was a psychotherapist; but she was so much more than that. In her sixties at that time, she had led a life that was full and rich, including being a set designer for several of the early films of Paul Robeson, the famous singer and running a saw-mill during the Second World War. I was sitting in her consulting room one day,

listening to her speaking, and suddenly I hear her say: “And some people can’t even look up at you, sweetheart.” I knew she meant me, because one of my problems was debilitating shyness and I couldn’t look anyone straight in the eyes. So, at that moment, perhaps for the first time, I plucked up courage and looked at her face-to-face. What I saw totally blew me away: she had gone and, in those eyes of hers, I saw the eyes of God. She had somehow ‘switched off’ and let God take over. I had never known anything like it before in my life, and I have never known anything like it since – and I remember the incredible grace of that moment to this day. From her face the eyes of God looked at me, and I saw two things in them: first, an unconditional love and, second, an indestructible joy. She said nothing, but just sat there gazing at me. Then, after about half a minute, she switched back on and she was herself again. The memory of it still inspired me. I *know* what I saw.

The only authentic response to God-given joy is gratitude. Thankfulness. It should be the first prayer on our lips: *thank you*. Thankfulness breaks open the heart to receive an inpouring of joy – as the Lord Jesus said: “A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap.” Thankfulness softens hearts that have become hardened or cynical; it fosters compassion; it draws us into a realisation of the indissoluble oneness of all life. We’re not separate or apart, any of us, because Being is one. In that oneness, we have no right to judge another, to

condemn or criticise or rebuke; oneness gives us our mandate to love. It is not gratitude for this or that in particular, but for the very fact that we exist – for the blessings of our life and the wonder of our being. The great Dominican mystic Meister Eckhart said: “If the only prayer you ever say is ‘thank you’ that is enough.” Thankfulness puts us in touch with the joy that remains deep down, even in the most troubled and difficult of circumstances... because joy is not the absence of suffering, it is the presence of God. When we know this joy in thankfulness, we can heal any wounded, any broken moment.

This is what Gaudete Sunday means.