

This Sunday is known as ‘Laetare’ Sunday. It’s Latin for ‘rejoice’ – and it’s not a noun, it’s verb, an imperative verb, so we’re being *told* to rejoice. Why? What are we supposed to rejoice about? In the 1970s there was a song by Ian Drury and the Blockheads called *Reasons to be Cheerful Part 3* and it listed a whole load of things to be cheerful about, such as: the Hammersmith Palais and the Bolshoi Ballet, seeing Piccadilly and being rather silly, the smile of a parrot and a little drop of claret, cheddar cheese and pickle and a bit of slap and tickle – and much more. The introduction is repeated ten times: ‘Why don’t you get back into bed?’ And to be honest, that’s how most of us can sometimes feel. Why bother?

Laetare Sunday gives us only one reason to be cheerful and bother: *because the darkness is never absolute*. In ourselves, in the tormented world we live in, no darkness can ever be absolute. The world is disfigured by suffering and violence – and at the same time it is *transfigured* by the love of a mother for her child and the music of Mozart.

In the song by the Mamas and the Papas, *Dedicated to the One I love*, a line in verse 4 says: ‘And the darkest hour is just before dawn’. I’m not sure whether this is actually true or not, but all kinds of people thought exactly the same thing:

- “Even the darkest night will end and the sun will rise.” (Victor Hugo)

- “In the midst of darkness, light persists.” (Mahatma Gandhi)

- “The most precious light is the one that visits you in your darkest hour!” (A Sufi mystic)

- “All the darkness in the world cannot extinguish the light of a single candle.” (St Francis of Assisi)

Look around: the darkness can never be absolute. When things in us or around us seem to go wrong, when we – or worse, those we love – are suffering, Laetare Sunday would have us hope: this is passing, it says, it will not last. It tells us that we are looking at the great carpet of life from the underneath, where everything is a tangle of knots and threads, nonsensical and chaotic; God looks at it from above, where he sees a design of surpassing beauty woven by love, in which every knot and thread has its place and purpose.

Anything that frightens you is not from God – full stop. Think of someone or something you truly love, that your heart beats for: the light of that love is like a candle – and, as St Francis of Assisi said, all the darkness in the world cannot put it out.