



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

3rd Sunday of Advent - Year A

Are you the One who is to come?

Readings: Isaiah 35: 1-6, 10, Ps 145, James 5: 7-10, Matthew 11: 2-11

Today is Gaudete Sunday – the Latin for REJOICE. It is for this reason that today we priests are robed in our favourite coloured vestments, a beautiful Rose. We reflect, liturgically, that moment in the Advent season of hope and longing and expectation when we begin to see the faint flickering of the dawning light of salvation when the Light of the World will break upon us at the Nativity.

We are becoming conscious of that ‘rose of such virtue’, as the old carol dubs Our Lady, who will shortly flower in the fruit of her womb, Jesus. We are excited by the ancient prophet’s proclamation that the desert itself will break into bloom, the barren wilderness will be a place of joy, the dry places of the human heart will be refreshed, the weary will be strengthened, the fearful made brave, the blind shall see the true reality, the deaf shall hear the Word and our dumb tongues sing it out. We are ready to march with Isaiah and his vision of the return of the redeemed to the holy city of Sion.

Yet this great outpouring of joy seems to judder to a halt in the Gospel. Far from the joy and liberation of the redeemed that great servant of God,

John the Baptist, is banged up in a stinking cell under Herod Antipas' hilltop fort of Machaerus where he has languished for two years and where he will shortly be summarily executed. His crime has been to criticise the king's marital arrangements (Herod divorced his first wife in order to marry his brother's wife – a peculiarly vicious old slapper whose dubious delights will, in a few years' time, cost Herod his kingdom).

John has dedicated his life to the promotion of Jesus, to the proclamation of Him as the Messiah, to the looking forward to the liberation of Israel and the re-establishment of the Kingdom of the House of David. John has stepped out of the limelight –'He must wax I must wane' – and pointed his own followers, and all who would listen, to Jesus. Two years into captivity, with no prospect of release, John, not unreasonably, sends a message to his beloved cousin. And it is a pointed one.

'Are you the One who is to come or do we look for another?'

There are two aspects to this provocative question and, as admirers of John and followers of Jesus, we can empathise with both.

First we can stand with John in the doomed prison of our mortality. In sickness, in adversity, in times of trial and spiritual darkness, we cry out to the Lord. 'Is it really you? Is what I have believed true? Is what I have tried to proclaim with my life in following you the ultimate reality?'

Most serious disciples have been in that dark place at some time or another. Most of us, like John, turn to Jesus and seek His reassurance. We turn to Jesus. The second string of John's enquiry also resonates with us. 'If you are the coming King, get on with it. We long with all our hearts for the triumph of your justice and mercy and love. We long for an

overturning of the old order of sin and death, of cruelty and despair, of sickness and alienation.

THY KINGDOM COME.....EVEN SO COME LORD JESUS.

Jesus responds fulsomely. He reminds John's messengers that all that the prophet Isaiah foretold is being fulfilled in Jesus' earthly ministry and He praises John's ministry to the highest. What He does not promise is a short cut to Heaven that avoids martyrdom or a salvation for humanity that finds a bypass to Calvary.

He speaks of Heaven. He reminds us that the greatest of men ranks below the least of Heaven – so much to look forward to – and John is the greatest thus far. So there is reassurance, reality and affirmation. God's Word is being fulfilled. We are a paradoxical people. We look to the Cross, the instrument of death, and we see the gateway to eternal life. We stumble on in the prison of our declining mortality yet we look to immortality in Christ. We wander through the barren desert and watch the unlikeliest flowers bloom in response to the Word of God. We kneel before the child in the arms of Mary and declare that the One who is behind all the infinite unknowable worlds of time and space has come among us as Man to reach out to all, to reach out to the lost and restore our divine destiny.

So here, on Gaudete Sunday, we rejoice. We rejoice because both the kingdom and our future are assured. Whether we are on our way to celebrate the feast or on the way to martyrdom, whether mortally ill or about to marry, in the springtime of the Spirit or in a winter of the soul – in the depths we rejoice.

And we can stand by the great saint and ask for his prayers to strengthen our weary hands, steady our trembling knees, give courage to our fainting hearts to be prepared and to prepare the way, in the hearts of others, for the coming of Jesus. For our task is no different from that of John the Baptist – a life of witness to the Saviour of the world.

So let's gird our loins and get ready:

- 1) Let's get ourselves before Jesus in the joy of Reconciliation before Christmas.
- 2) Let's commit to telling another soul about Jesus and why we rejoice.

St. John the Baptist – pray for us.

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