

Homily (notes) from Canon Philip Dyson
17th December 2023 - 3rd Sunday of Advent

Readings (Year B): 1st: Isaiah 61:1-2,10-11. 2nd: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24. **Gospel:** John 1:6-8,19-28.

Gaudete Sunday, the church always calls on us to rejoice: The Entrance Antiphon “Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice.

St Paul in the 2nd reading reminds us of that; “be happy at all times” is the translation we have, but the Greek word used for be happy is rejoice, the same as from the antiphon; and pray unceasingly.

We are called to have so much hope in our hearts and trust in God that we are able to do this in good times as well as bad. Paul urges us to nourish the spiritual dimension of our lives and learn to be more sensitive to God’s presence among us.

Christians in the Holy Land are able only just to do that. The Latin Patriarch says to us all stand strong and focus more on the spiritual meaning. In heart and mind we stand with the poor people in Gaza today.

The Holy Land is an extremely tense place, far worse than for many years. It has been brewing for a long time, just as it was 2000 years ago. The hardship on the Palestinians is dreadful. The devastation in Gaza unbelievable. We know the Catholic Church of the Holy Family there has been damaged. Pope Francis is in frequent contact with the assistant priest there as well as religious sisters belonging to various congregations who are living and working in the Gaza strip.

Palestinian people across much if not all of Israel have their movements restricted, work permits withdrawn, access to their land or olive groves removed, and for Palestinians living in Bethlehem the town is hemmed in by a 30-foot wall built all around it and with guarded check points, which may be closed at any time.

In 1950 Christians made up 86% of the population of Bethlehem. Today that figure is 10% and falling. No pilgrims are there anywhere at present. During Covid Israel was the country that had some of the toughest lockdowns and things were very difficult, esp. for people in Bethlehem.

Isaiah in the first reading and the Psalm taken from Mary’s Magnificat prophesy that poor people and social outcasts have particular reason to be happy, as God has taken an option for those who are poor; prisoners will be freed, those who are starving will be fed and the broken hearted will be healed.

That text is of course the one given to Jesus to read out in the Synagogue in Nazareth when he opened his public ministry, offering good news to the poor and proclaiming a time of grace.

Our Lady too in the Psalm/Canticle places herself in the context of the new and just world that Jesus brings.

In the gospel we sense a feeling of anticipation growing among the people. John’s witness is that the Messiah has come; is among them. John directs our gaze to the presence of Christ among us. It is possible to miss him.

Many we know reject him or are indifferent or unbelieving in him. In the turmoil of life we can forget **one** aspect of our faith; that of joy and rejoicing in the midst of so much going on.

It does us good to be reminded of the great blessings for which we are called always to be grateful and thankful:

the knowledge that God loves us so much and came to bring us that good news:

the promise that all barriers to freedom and whatever prevents us living the fulness of life will be swept away in God’s kingdom:

the presence of the Holy Spirit always helping and urging us to create a more just and fairer world.

As we prepare for the coming of Christ again:

Are we a voice that prepares the way for Christ in others?

Are we a witness to Christ in our family, our work, our social life; in our language, political attitudes, prejudices?

Are we ashamed of our Catholic identity when challenged?

Are we a community which brings light into darkened lives?

Do we bring hope to all who are imprisoned or enslaved by addiction; life to the depressed and moribund; and good news of justice to the poor?

There, according to Jesus, are the signs of the presence and victory of the Messiah.
Are they seen in our lives and community?

He stands among us...unknown...unless we witness to him.

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