

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 & John 1:6-8, 19-28

There is no doubt that the key theme on this third Sunday in Advent is rejoicing. The word 'rejoice' is sprinkled throughout today's readings: in the reading from Isaiah, the prophet proclaimed that God had sent him to bring "glad tidings to the poor" and "I rejoice heartily in the Lord, in my God is the joy of my soul". A psalm undergirds Mary's Magnificat, in which she exclaimed; "My soul rejoices in my God, my spirit finds joy in God my saviour". These readings have their basis in the Hebrew language, which has more words for joy and rejoicing than any other language and this from a language known for having few words. In the Old Testament, 13 Hebrew roots, found in 27 different words, are used primarily for some aspect of joy or joyful participation in religious worship. The Old Testament is a book of joy! The New Testament is a

book of Good News! This is God's will for us to be joyful, to pray continuously and to give God thanks in all circumstances. One thing many people have forgotten in their Christian pilgrimage is the duty to be joyful. Maybe one of the reasons that Jesus used a little child as the sole embodiment of the kingdom of God is the innate joyfulness of children. I remember being told by a missionary that the most startling impact of witnessing the slums of Mumbai for the first time was not the overwhelming poverty and the atrocious smell but that the air was filled with the laughter of children at play. Psychiatrist Elisabeth Kubler-Ross spoke movingly of an even worse situation. Visiting a children's barracks in one of the German death camps after the Second World War, she had expected to see evidence of horror. Instead, the walls were covered with drawings of butterflies, a universal symbol of joy.

For adults, one of the things that make Christmas so joyful is seeing the wide-eyed expressions of wonder on little faces. Children know about joy. Somehow we adults seem to lose that awe and wonder somewhere along the road to 'grownuphood'. I read recently a story of a woman's remembrances of her grandmother. At the time of her grandfather's death, at 90 years of age, her grandparents had been married for over 50 years. And the grandmother felt the loss deeply. The central focus had been taken from her life, and she retreated from the world, entering into an extended period of mourning. Her grieving lasted nearly five years, and during that time, her granddaughter visited her every week or two. One day, she visited her expecting to find her in her usual state of depression. Instead, she found her sitting in her wheelchair beaming. When she didn't comment quickly enough

about the obvious change in her demeanour, her grandmother confronted her: "Don't you want to know why I'm so happy? Aren't you even curious?" She went on to explain: "Last night I got an answer. I finally know why God took my husband and left me behind to live without him. Your grandfather knew that the secret of life is love, and he lived it every day. He had become unconditional love in action. I have known about unconditional love, but I haven't fully lived it. That's why he got to go first, and I had to stay behind. All this time I thought I was being punished for something, but last night I found out that I was left behind as a gift from God. He let me stay so that I too could turn my life into love. You see, you can't learn the lesson after you die. Love has to be lived here on earth. Once you leave, it's too late. So I was given the gift of life so that I can learn to live and love here and now." On one of

her subsequent visits, the grandmother told her of something that had happened to her that day. "This morning, your uncle was upset and angry with me over something I had done. I didn't even flinch. I received his anger, wrapped it in love and returned it with joy." Her eyes twinkled as she added, "It was even kind of fun, and his anger dissolved." Though age continued on its course, the grandmother's life was vigorously renewed. In the last days of her life, the granddaughter visited her often in the hospital. As she walked towards her room one day, the nurse on duty looked into her eyes and said, "Your grandmother is a very special lady, you know...she's a light."

Our Gospel reading this morning proclaimed "The Light" from before time and forever. In the first chapter of the Gospel According to John we are immediately struck by the fact that he is not named "John the baptiser" as he

is in Mark, or “John the Baptist” as he is in Matthew, or even “John the son of Zechariah” as we find in Luke. John is simply “a man sent from God ... as a witness to testify to the Light.”

The Light, of course, is “the Word,” or *logos*, which has been with God and is God since before creation, and as it says in the first chapter of John, through Him “all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.” This same Word or Light, we are told, “became flesh and dwelt among us - pitched his tent to tent among us.”

As God’s Word, God’s Light grew up and lived in our midst, he would one day read Isaiah chapter 61 in his hometown synagogue and declare, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” That is, the time is now to begin living out the vision of salvation and mission Isaiah

proclaimed. It is time for salvation as the reality of this world as it should be! It is this vision of salvation and mission John was sent to witness. John is a witness, in Greek he is a *martyria*, from which we get the word “martyr.” Witnesses say what they have seen or heard or attest to the truth of another’s testimony.

John’s role is to recognise the true Light that has come into the world - a light that the darkness has not overcome - and to call attention to this Light so that others might recognise it and believe. Belief in this sense means to recognise, trust, and commit ourselves to the Light - the Light which is a fulfilment of Isaiah’s vision. This in turn means to commit ourselves to the kind of salvation and mission that Isaiah proclaims, that John recognises, that Jesus lives, and that both John and Jesus call us to follow so that our lives might

become “a light to the nations.”

John was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. John did not come to decorate everyone and everything for Christmas. John did not come to announce the beginning of the Christmas sale season. He did not come to stir us into a frenzy of shopping and spending. He came to remind us and to bear witness to all who will listen that the darkest forces of the world are not as powerful as they claim or appear to be. We begin this Third Sunday of Advent by praying, “Stir up your power, O Lord, and with Great Might come among us.” Will we take the time this Advent to allow God to stir things up within us and within our parishes and throughout the Church, so that we might become more like John, “a man sent from God?” For that is, in fact, who we really are - men and women sent from God as

witnesses to testify to the Light, so that all might believe through him.

And maybe, just maybe, as we testify, bear witness to, and proclaim the glory of the Light, we will embody the Light and become those who reveal the life of Christ anew in the world - a world that increasingly is desperate to see and know the Light. Let us shine brightly and joyfully with the light of Christ.