

Something is a little different today from the last two weeks. We have taken a break from the violet vestments of Advent and replaced them with rose. We have arrived at the third candle on our advent wreaths, the rose candle. Why this change? Well, we use the color violet during Advent as a reminder that Advent is a penitential season. And while it is perhaps not so intense a time of penance as Lent is every year, Advent is a time when we are called to prepare our hearts for the Lord's coming. It is a time for us to turn away from sin and to make a straight path in our hearts for God to come in. And hopefully the first two weeks of Advent have been fruitful for us so far. Hopefully we are spending more time in prayer and preparing our hearts for the Lord's coming.

But this Sunday, the liturgy shifts to a new focus. The first words of the Mass, the entrance antiphon sum this up beautifully: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice. Indeed the Lord is near." Rejoice, rejoice! The Latin word for this is Gaudete - and so holy mother Church has traditionally called this Sunday Gaudete Sunday. Rejoice! This is what the Rose vestments symbolize. This is what the third, rose candle symbolizes. This is why the music this weekend is a little lighter, a little more joyful. This Sunday we rejoice for indeed the Lord is near.

We can hear this message so clearly in the readings for this Sunday. In Isaiah, the words of the prophet are filled with joy. The Lord has anointed Isaiah and sent him to proclaim the good news to all those who suffer. The Lord is using Isaiah to announce a year of favor, a year of blessing for the people. What greater joy than when God comes to bring His justice and His mercy to His people!

In the responsorial psalm we hear the Blessed Mother's great hymn of praise - the Magnificat. She echoes the joy of the prophet Isaiah. She announces the good news of a merciful God who comes to save His people Israel.

And in the letter to the Thessalonians, St. Paul sings this refrain once again: "Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. In all circumstances give thanks - for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus."

On this Gaudete Sunday, the message is clear: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice. Indeed the Lord is near."

As disciples of Christ, our call is clear: we should be joyful people. This becomes a special focus this weekend as Christmas draws near, but our joy should not be limited to this

third Sunday in Advent. Whether in Advent or Christmas, whether in Lent or Easter or in Ordinary Time, we should be joyful people. Why? Because for us, the Lord is always near!

There is never a time, never even a moment when the Lord is not perfectly near to us. In the best moments of our lives and in the worst, the Lord is near. When we feel close to God in our prayer and when we feel a million miles away from Him, the Lord is near. Even in the greatest moments of sickness or suffering or sorrow or death, the Lord is near. And if we believe this by faith, if we trust that God is always near, then every moment should be a moment of rejoicing.

But there's little doubt that every one of us, at some moment in our life, will feel that joy is lacking. Surely, all of us experience those moments where it is difficult to rejoice. In these times of our lives, we must turn to Christ. He is waiting for us in the quiet of prayer. He is speaking to us in the words of Holy Scripture. He is reaching out to us, Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity, in the Eucharist. And so that call resounds: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice. Indeed the Lord is near."

In the moments of darkness, it is Christ who is our light! In the moments of trial and distress when joy seems so distant, it is Christ who brings us peace and hope and consolation. The Lord is near to us. May we turn to Him and Rejoice!