

December 16, 2018 Third Sunday of Advent----Gaudete Sunday

Bishop Bradley's Reflections on the Sunday Readings

I love the Third Sunday of Advent, don't you? (And it's NOT because we get to wear these really fashionable pink, a.k.a. rose, vestments!) No, it's because we're getting closer to what Advent is preparing our hearts for in the first place: the celebration of the coming of the Savior, Christ the Lord! The Advent Wreath is 3/4 lit! And the Scripture Readings for this Third Sunday turn our hearts and minds to all the reasons why we should be Joy-full---filled with joy!

This Third Sunday is also known as "Gaudete Sunday", and that Latin word is the imperative form of the word that means "rejoice"; in other words, it's not an invitation---it's more of a directive---a command---an obligation. All the Readings for this Third Sunday of Advent reflect that same theme of "Joy in the Lord". We are told: *"Rejoice"...."Shout with Joy"...."Be glad"...."the Lord is near"*.

This may also be the Sunday when many of us finally (if it hasn't happened already) get into the Christmas spirit since the number of shopping/preparation days are into the single digits: only 9 days away. For the procrastinators among us, we face the stark reality: ready or not, Christmas is almost here! And even though we might find ourselves running around in 12 different directions trying to get all the gifts bought and wrapped, and all the other aspects of our Christmas celebrations checked off our "to do" lists, (which for some of us might be causing no little amount of anxiety and stress), we hear St. Paul tell us this morning: *"Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God."* Even as important as all those tasks and projects on our "to-do" list are, it's even more important that we keep everything in perspective, and make room for the spiritual preparations that we need to be focusing on during this last week of Advent. So how do we find Joy in the midst of anxiety?

For many among us, there may be more things going on than just the busy-ness of Christmas preparations; there are the ongoing problems and worries of life; perhaps even a crisis within our family that might be taking place; maybe there is stress resulting from the sickness or death of a loved one. How do we find Joy in the midst of Pain?

There's a tendency to confuse "joy" with "happiness" and "pleasure", or to think that those two realities are synonymous. But, in fact, they are very different. Happiness and pleasure are emotional states of being that result from situations in our lives that are pleasing to us. Joy on the other hand is more of a spiritual reality, the result of our Faith in God and His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Even in the face of problems, difficulties or challenges we might be facing in our lives, we should still be filled with Joy as we "countdown" to Christmas. We can do that if we can focus, not on the secular side of the Christmas holiday, but on the spiritual side; we should focus on the celebration of the greatest event in the history of the world when 2,000 years ago, the Word of God became Flesh, and began making His dwelling among us. Christmas is the greatest cause of our Joy, and is that which gives us the ability to be joyful ALL the time, no matter what other circumstances are taking place in our lives or in our world, because our God has come to be with us. Or to put it in the words of today's Responsorial Psalm: *"Cry out with joy and gladness for among you is the great and Holy One of Israel."*

When we stop to think about it, we should always be doing what the Prophet Zephaniah told us to do in today's First Reading: *"Shout for joy....sing joyfully....be glad and exult with all your heart."* Why? Because the God of Heaven and Earth loves us. In fact, the Prophet tells us something very important for us to remember: not only should we rejoice because God loves us, but God Himself rejoices because of His love for us. We heard Zephaniah tell us: *"He (God) will rejoice over you with gladness and renew you in His Love. He will sing joyfully because of you, as one sings at festivals."*

That's why we should do what St. Paul tells us: *"Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again, rejoice!"* Even with all that we have to do, and in spite of whatever other problems or worries we're dealing with, we still need to: "Rejoice always!"

Joy is more of a virtue than an emotion. Joy is what results from the three most important of the Virtues, the ones we know as the Theological Virtues: Faith, Hope and Love. Joy results from "believing" (**faith**) that God, Who IS Love, is always near; Joy results from "hoping" (**hope**) that our God will be faithful to His promise; and finally, Joy results from the deep conviction that our God loves us unconditionally, in spite of our own unworthiness and sinfulness. Joy comes from the way we share ourselves in Love with others. Joy does not result from what others do to make us "feel" joyful; Joy results when we know (believe) that

we are loved, and when we love others as God loves us. “Joy” is one of the Fruits of the Holy Spirit.

We could look at it this way as a much more simple way to understand Joy. “J-O-Y” is the outcome of Loving Jesus (**J**), Loving Others (**O**), and Loving Yourself (**Y**). Not only that, but at the same time, making sure to have “Jesus”, “Others” and “Yourself” in the proper order of priority in our lives: Loving Jesus with our whole heart, soul, mind and strength; loving our neighbor (Others)--- and then, trying to love ourselves!

In today’s Gospel Reading, we heard about John the Baptist who was answering people’s questions: “What are we to do?” Three different groups asked for his advice: the general population, the soldiers, and the tax collectors. Basically, John told each of them: do what you are supposed to do and treat others with justice and charity. What do you think John the Baptist would say to you if you asked him that same question: what should I do? I think he’d give pretty much the same answer.

In some ways we could say that to “do what we’re supposed to do” is the most minimal requirement we can make of anyone; and that’s true. But wouldn’t it be amazing if everyone actually did what they were supposed to do, and did it with love, care, compassion, and kindness?! How about Employers and Employees---wouldn’t that make a big difference in the workplace? How about Spouses and Family members, Parents and Children---there would be so much less conflict and greater harmony? And especially in light of all that’s going on in our Church these days, what if Bishops and Priests did what we were ordained to do---if we faithfully and fervently and enthusiastically preached the Good News of Jesus---there would be no scandals, and trust could be restored.

ALL of us are to live our faith, rejoice in God’s Love for us, be Joy-full because God is with us in the midst of our life circumstances, and share our Joy with those in our lives who need it. And we need to remember: God is not just near; He is here! He is right inside each of us; He is right here among us. And in just minutes, Jesus will be truly and really Present in the Holy Eucharist. Our God makes Himself THAT accessible that He gives Himself to us in His Body and Blood to be our Food and Drink.

And so, clearly, we have a ton of reasons to shout for Joy because our God loves us, no matter what issues, problems, concerns, or worries we have; even if

we haven't even started any Christmas shopping yet! No matter what: *"Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice!"*

With our hearts full of Joy, let us continue to make the beautiful prayer of Advent a part of everything we do---every Christmas card we write, every gift we wrap, every thought we think, every breath we take: ***"Come, Lord Jesus!"***

God bless you, now and always!