

## Homily for Gaudete Sunday

December 11, 2016

Isaiah 35:1–6a, 10

Psalm 146:6–10

James 5:7–10

Matthew 11:2–11

### *Holy Optimism in a world of seeming contradictions*

If you've ever been outside for a summer sunrise, you'll notice something fascinating about the hour or so before sunrise. Of course, the sky starts out black, and then it fairly quickly gets light – usually a bright blue. Then, as sunrise gets nearer, but still before you can actually see the Sun, the sky explodes into a symphony of rose colors, the colour of my vestment for today

The Church calls this Sunday *Gaudete Sunday*. Gaudete is a command to have joy. ...the color Rose denoting the fact that the sunrise is getting nearer, the Son of God stands on the edge of storming the beaches of this world as a fellow human being.

The liturgy for the Third Sunday of Advent, therefore, invites us to intensify the interior pace of our pilgrimage to the Lord who comes to save us. Jesus, source of our peace, is coming. For this reason, despite difficulties and problems, we are invited to be full of holy optimism. St Paul urges us in Philippians 4:4: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice". It is this verse that forms the theme for this third Sunday of Advent because it is the Entrance Antiphon of the Mass.

On this Gaudete Sunday, I want us to ponder the question: What does it mean to live with holy optimism? To begin to answer this question we want to see how this holy optimism is closely tied to this word "rejoice" or the Latin "Gaudete". In order to appreciate the full meaning of the word "rejoice," we need to consider it in its biblical Greek. In Greek the word in Philippians 4:4 is *chairō*, which is very close to the word *chairōs*, which means "grace". God's grace is the favour he shows us through the life, passion, death and resurrection of Jesus. It is through our relationship of grace with Jesus mediated to us through the sacraments that we learn the disposition of Gaudete. Chairō, to rejoice, is the verb that most fully characterizes those who are living in the grace of Jesus. Therefore to rejoice is to be full of holy optimism.

Now let's take a moment to think about this word "optimism". It is from the Latin "optimus", that means "best". Therefore to be filled with a holy optimism allows us to be hopeful because our sight is fixed always on the rising Son, Jesus Christ who enters into the this world's night so as to lift us from the darkness into his light-filled presence.

This holy optimism is one that is able to truthfully name the context in which we live out our faith. A context that is described in today's readings as the cracked contours of the Judean desert, a farmer's germinating field and a Herodian prison cell.

Before we look at each of these images I would like to read to you a beautiful passage from the Catechism that speaks with honesty about the challenge holy optimism faces in a world like this.

***Faith is often lived in darkness and can be put to the test. The world we live in often seems very far from the one promised us by faith. Our experiences of evil and suffering, injustice, and death, seem to contradict the Good News; they can shake our faith and become a temptation against it.***<sup>1</sup>

Notice that the Catechism says these tests seem to contradict the Good News – not that they, in the end, actually do.

So let's look at the images of cracked soil, germinating seed and John in prison as we meditate on living a life of holy optimism when the seeming contradictions we experience in life could lead us to say. Why rejoice? What for?

So ponder with me this verse:

***The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,  
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;***

'The wilderness is a way for the biblical imagination to think about our lives without the presence of God. It is here I invite you to consider the cracked contours of a soul that is not experiencing the refreshing grace of God. Like the ground, the soul is hard and so very lifeless.

Can you think of a time when this picture of an arid landscape described your soul? Maybe today this is how you feel. There is a barrenness that is leaving you parched.

Hear now the hope-filled words of Isaiah. It is when we feel most arid and spiritually discouraged that grace can surprise us. It can be like a sudden rain where the barren desert devoid of optimism can become a place of praise and life. It can become a Gaudete plain.

This passage sings of the reality of God's saving power in the cracked contours of the present world. The desert bursts into gorgeous flowers; pale hearts become strong; the lame jump and exult. What was smashed has been rendered whole; what was broken has been restored to full power. The God of all creation enters history. The glory of Lebanon will be given them, the splendor of Carmel and Sharon. Here is a hymn of rejoicing sung by the most unlikely choir. But the more we listen to their song the more we realize it is also a Messiah song. It is the very things Isaiah sings about that Jesus will in his life fulfill.

***“Go and tell John what you hear and see: 5 the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.”***

We move from the cracked contours of lives given growth through the merciful rains of God's grace, to grace's fulfillment in Jesus. Words that John's disciples were to take back to the man

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<sup>1</sup> Catholic Church. (2000). Catechism of the Catholic Church (2nd Ed., p. 45). Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference.

who perhaps had lost something of the holy optimism that had so marked his public life. “Behold the Lamb of God”, said John, “who takes away the sins of the world. “I am not worthy to stoop down and untie his sandal. I baptize you with water but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

Now John is in a place where the Gaudete disposition is harder to call forth. The Judean desert that had been the venue for his proclamation has become representative of his soul. The cracked contours that lead to the question: “Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another”?

Remember what the Catechism noted:

***“Our experiences of evil and suffering, injustice, and death, seem to contradict the Good News; they can shake our faith and become a temptation against it.”***

Herod’s prison cell seemed to contradict the Good News John had so optimistically proclaimed. And yet Jesus is there to share with him Gaudete words. Through John’s disciples, they will take back word to their teacher that Jesus is fulfilling Isaiah’s vision.

But here is the thing about John, the one who is greatest among those born of woman but the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. What does Jesus mean by this? John was the last great prophet who announced the coming of Jesus. According to Matthew’s chronology, John is arrested all the way back in chapter 4 before Jesus begins his public ministry. Therefore John never saw in person any of the signs Jesus performed and so did not share first hand in witnessing the arrival of the messianic kingdom.

How important it was though for John to hear the Gospel Message brought back to him. A word that spoke with the assurance that Jesus truly is the one who is to come. Gospel words are filled with holy optimism. Words that Jesus did not take to John personally but sent them *persona Christi* by commissioned messengers. Such is the word that we hear whenever we are at Mass. These are Jesus words and there filled with holy optimism because they not only celebrate God at work among us, they also announce that the very Messiah who inaugurated the eternal kingdom come to earth, would face his own death at the hands of that other kingdom represented by the likes of Herod and Pilate.

There from that prison cell that would become his place of execution John could rejoice because the seed of the Messiah’s reign had indeed been planted. This brings us to James

***Be patient, therefore, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. Behold, the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient over it until it receives the early and the late rain... Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand... As an example of suffering and patience, brethren, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.***

Take the prophets for an example, like John the Baptist. He was one who boldly proclaimed Christ and also knew the meaning of suffering patience.

To live with holy optimism is to have the attitude of the farmer, who knows the precious fruit of the earth will come. But because it is a drawn out coming he looks for signs of hope along the way, while at the same time having to endure the weather that can impede the harvest.

To live with holy optimism in a world of seeming contradictions is to be a hopeful people. For they see that the true Son is rising in this world and the rose colours call us to look up and see.

When we do we discover cracked contours of desert soil springing up with signs of grace. Signs that point to the Messiah whose good news can reach those facing the bad news of death in Herod's prison cell.

Indeed it was from another prison cell that the apostle Paul, who was also beheaded, wrote:

***Gaudete in Domino semper iterum dico Gaudete***

Which when translated means:

***“Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say rejoice”***