

Rose Coloured Glasses

Gaudete Sunday, 2017

This is Gaudete Sunday, the Latin word for “rejoice”. Our readings for today centre of the theme of Joy, but it is a certain kind of joy. It is a joy that is rising in our hearts but not yet fully realized. It is like the rays from the sun as it first appears. Such a light is characterized by rose coloured hues as it breaks over the horizon beginning its ascent into the sky. The joy for this Sunday is similar. Because of Jesus Christ, disciples of Jesus look at the world in a certain way.

That I am wearing a Rose Chasuble is to invite us to see the world through “Rose Coloured Glasses”. Now this phrase is often meant in a derogatory way. “When we say of a person: “Take off those Rose Coloured Glasses” we mean something like “stop being so naïve, don’t be such an idealist and start living in the real world”.

But this Sunday invites us to see the world through those rose coloured glasses. For while it is true there is much in the news and our lives that is trying and difficult, we see life primarily from the perspective of Jesus Christ. Because of his Death and Resurrection, joy is rising in our hearts, just as the morning sun as it begins to rise creates a rose light. However we also know that this joy will not be experienced fully until we ascend from this world to that which awaits us in heavenly glory.

One example of such a rose coloured perspective is illustrated in the following story.

As a third-century man was anticipating death, he penned these last words to a friend: "It's a bad world, an incredibly bad world. But I have discovered in the midst of it a quiet and holy people who have learned a great secret. They have found a joy which is a thousand times better than any pleasure of our sinful life. They are despised and persecuted, but they care not. They are masters of their souls. They have overcome the world. These people are the Christians and I am one of them."

Such is the perspective of those who celebrate Gaudete Sunday. We are realists when it comes to seeing the world for what it is, but because it is not the world informing how we live, we are joy-filled optimists. Because, like John the Baptist, we are like the voice crying: Prepare the way for the rising Son of God, Jesus Christ our Lord, whose birth into this world allows us to see all of life from that perspective.

Today, I want to concentrate on one verse from the passage from 1st Thessalonians. Here is the earliest extant Christian document. There is no writing earlier than 1st Thessalonians. It was penned by St. Paul sometime around the year 50 AD. In this verse he is clearly inviting us to see the world through Rose Coloured Glasses. But like our anonymous 3rd century author, St. Paul also knew the great struggles we face living in the world. In what is his most detailed account of his own suffering, he writes in 2nd Corinthians:

I've been jailed more often, beaten up more times than I can count, and at death's door time after time. I've been flogged five times with the Jews' thirty-nine lashes, beaten by Roman

rods three times, pummeled with rocks once. I've been shipwrecked three times, and immersed in the open sea for a night and a day. (2 Co 11:23–29).

The list goes on but for the sake of time I have truncated it. Surely if there was a person who would not see the world through Rose Coloured Glasses it would be St. Paul. But listen again to his instruction to us from today's reading:

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Here is an encouragement from the great Apostle to put on those rose coloured glasses.

But you might counter, "wait a minute Father. Didn't you just say, 1 Thessalonians was St. Paul's earliest letter? He was still an optimist and hadn't yet faced the trials described in 2 Corinthians, a letter written six years later. Maybe he wouldn't have been so effusive in his optimism after all of those trials".

That is a good point. But interestingly we can turn to one of Paul's last letters, Philippians, written some 12 years after 1 Thessalonians and we read in chapter 4, verse 4:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.

How can we rejoice and pray always and give thanks in all circumstances? Isn't this a bit over the top?

We need to understand that for Paul the coming of Jesus changed everything. If you don't get that you are not getting Christmas and Christianity. Jesus is not just one more teacher among many. For Paul, Jesus' dying and rising turned everything upside down. Usual ways of thinking and looking at the world were no longer valid because grace has transfigured nature.

But still, to rejoice always. Come on. The balanced and realistic person would rejoice sometimes and when appropriate but also weep and feel down. Wouldn't rejoicing always seem insane?

Your mother died, your house burned down, you lost your job, but never mind rejoice.

To rejoice always doesn't mean we should be on an emotional high all the time. Always be in giddy state of exultation. What Paul wants us to understand is that even when we are facing great hardships, as Paul did, the Resurrection of Jesus signals that a victory of universal significance has been won that no negativity could undo. Even if I feel depressed, even in all of that, I am convinced a victory has been won and at that level I rejoice.

It is this quality of joy we see in the saints who in the midst of suffering have a sense of peace that abides through the worst of life.

Let me go back to Philippians, that later letter and see how clearly it parallels 1 Thessalonians:

Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Do you hear the consistency in Paul? Be it his earliest, or one of his later letters, praying always and giving thanks in all circumstances will enable us to have our hearts guarded by the peace of Christ, Jesus.

So let's think about "pray without ceasing". How can one even do this? Even Trappist and Carthusian monks take a break occasionally from prayer. If even a full time monk can't pray without ceasing, how can we?

Think of the difference Jesus has made by his incarnation. He has made it possible for all people to participate in his relationship with his Father. The Son lives in intimate union with the Father that gives rise to the Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, whereby the Trinitarian love is made available to us today.

The Son takes to himself our fallen humanity and gives us access to the same relationship he has had from all eternity with the Father. As the eternal son of God and by becoming human Jesus gives our fallen human nature access to that same relationship. We can become sharers in the Divine life through baptism. Our lives are a constant communion with the Father.

Think of the analogy of breathing. We are dependent every moment on the oxygen we breathe in order to have life. Most often we are not aware of our breathing. Prayer is becoming conscious in an explicit way what is always taking place in our relationship between the Son and the Father. In that way Paul is right, pray always. At the depth of our being we are in this communion with the Father through the Son and although this does not mean we spend every active moment in intentional prayer we understand something Paul said when in Athens in quoting one of their philosophers:

'In him we live and move and have our being'

In all circumstances give thanks. Think of all the good things. A little weird to be thankful for hardship, setbacks. Think of the fires in California.

Remember what has changed with the coming of Christ. Jesus entered into our humanity experiencing every aspect of it except for sin. Therefore sickness, disappointment, failure, rejection, anxiety, even death itself, the Son of God experiences them. By touching all of these with his divinity he transforms them making them in principle a means of sanctification. By his stripes you are healed, by the sacred Cross we are saved.

We who therefore participate in Christ see the world differently. Not just as the dreadful play of good and evil but the place where grace is ever where and always on offer. And so, yes, even for the worst things you have endured, even for the most terrible moment give thanks, because they have been transfigured by Christ into a means of salvation.

So let's see the world through the rose coloured perspective this Sunday celebrates as we lean to rejoice and pray always and give thanks in all circumstances for this is God's will for us.