

The Banquet Table of God's Love

Picture a table piled high with food and surrounded by hungry diners, each of whom has a long fork attached to his or her wrist. Those who insist on feeding themselves will go hungry, while those who are willing to feed one another will be perfectly satisfied. What God holds out to everyone all the time is the banquet of his love, but some know how to eat at that table and others don't.

On this third Sunday of Advent we are called to the Banquet Table of God's Love. This day in the Liturgical Calendar has a special name: *Gaudete Sunday*. "Gaudete" is the Latin word for Rejoice and its theme is taken from today's Epistle, Philippians 4:4-5:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice. ⁵ Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.¹

Joy is associated with a quality described here as "gentleness". This word has a fascinating etymology. The root of the word in Greek is "icon." What is an icon? We know this word as it relates to all those images on our desk top allowing us to access programmes on our computers. However, the word icon is also used to describe depictions of Jesus, Mary and the Saints. They are like artistic invitations that beckon us to draw close to the Company of Heaven.

Let's think about the association between the adjective "gentleness" and "icon". If a computer icon allows us to access the complex systems contained on its hardware, and a religious icon allows us to draw close to God through beautiful images; when displaying gentleness, we are living images, icons, allowing people to access the grace and presence of the Lord.

As we choose to be living images of God through exhibiting gentleness, we will know joy because the Lord is near.

Now think about joy and the nearness of the Lord in relation to Mary, the most complete icon of gentleness imaginable. Remember what Gabriel said in greeting? "Hail, full of grace, **the Lord is with you**" It is the nearness of God which makes the Virgin rejoice. And the nearness of the Messiah will make the unborn John the Baptist show forth his joy in the womb of Elizabeth. And the Angel will say to the shepherds: "Be not afraid; for behold, I **bring you good news of a great joy** which will come to all the people; *for to you is born this day a Saviour*"

When the Lord is near there is joy. Listen again to these verses from our Zephaniah reading:

*Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;
shout, O Israel!
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter Jerusalem!²*

¹ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#). (1993). (Php 4:4-5). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

² [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#). (1993). (Zep 3:14). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

Why this rejoicing and exaltation? The answer:

“The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst”.

Notice the next stanza of Zephaniah’s poetry:

***The LORD, your God, is in your midst,
a warrior who gives victory;
he will rejoice over you with gladness,
he will renew you in his love;
he will exult over you with loud singing
¹⁸ as on a day of festival.³***

Twice mention is made of the Lord being “in the midst” of His people. Because of this the people exult and God’ rejoices. When we are icons of gentleness it delights the Lord and we will know his nearness. We could therefore narrow down the theme of this Sunday into one sentence:

Joy is to be very close to Jesus; unhappiness is to be distant from him.

But how then do we come to know this joy. By learning to live practically the way of gentleness.

There is a kind of icon that is called a Tryptic, that is divided into three panels as it represents a unified theme.

In today’s Gospel John the Baptist paints a tryptic of gentleness thus showing us with simplicity how we are to be icons displaying that the Lord is near. His council calls us to see how at the Banquet of God’s Love it is in serving others we will come to know the joy of gentleness.

Three groups of people are drawn to John the Baptist; the crowd, the tax collectors and soldiers

The crowd learns that joy comes from living generously; the tax collectors from living honestly and the soldiers from living justly. When we are cultivating the way of generosity, honesty and justice we will be increasingly icons of gentleness.

Generosity is expressed especially by being icons of gentleness towards the poor. St. John the Baptist says to the crowd:

Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.⁴

There is this beautiful verse from Proverbs 19:17 that states John’s words this way:

³ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#). (1993). (Zep 3:17–18). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

⁴ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#). (1993). (Lk 3:11). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

He who is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will repay him for his deed.

Why is this kind of generosity so important? It shows how close we are to the Lord and we will be repaid with the dividend of joy.

Honesty is expressed in dealing fairly with others in business. The tax collectors of the first century were notorious crooks who were only concerned in feeding themselves. The most famous tax collector of them all, Zacchaeus, experienced a profound change of heart when Jesus drew near to him coming into his home. He became a gentleman and discovered what it meant to feast at the Banquet of God's love.

“Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded any one of anything, I restore it fourfold.”

He did, and then some, what St. John counseled when he said:

Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.”

The third quality to complete generosity, and honesty in our tryptic of gentleness is justice. What is justice? It is to treat people with respect and dignity, something the soldiers to whom John was speaking probably didn't do. These men were known as the Judean police who assisted the tax collectors in getting people to “pay up”.⁵

To them St. John says:

Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.⁶

We could put this another way. Don't shake anyone down and live contently.

The qualities of generosity, honesty and justice are the way we learn to feed others at the Banquet of God's Love as we live the way of gentleness.

As we move closer to the great celebration of Christmas, when we rejoice that Jesus is with us, I would like to invite you to consider how are you relating at the Banquet Table of God's love? Are you living your life as an icon of gentleness as you grow in generosity, honesty and justice? Where would you like to grow in becoming ever more a gentle man or gentle woman?

Let me end by showing you a special expression of God's Banquet of Love. These photos were taken yesterday and celebrate the gentleness of you beloved St. Peter's Family. As they illustrate, we delivered Hampers where the 621 Angel Gifts collected allowed SVDP to provide:

- 123 family gifts
- 174 articles of clothing for children

⁵ Bock, D. L. (1994). [Luke: 1:1–9:50](#) (Vol. 1, p. 313). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

⁶ [The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition](#). (1993). (Lk 3:14). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

- 174 gifts for children
- 150 gift cards

In total, 104 adults and 183 children benefited from the generosity of St. Peter's Parishioners and is an icon of gentleness where Paul's words found genuine expression:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice. ⁵ Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.