

Substantial Joy!

March 11th 2018

Today is *Laetare* Sunday. *Laetare* means "Rejoice" in Latin. The theme for the day is expressed in the opening of antiphon taken from Isaiah 66. If you have your missalette you will find it on page 79:

Rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad for her, all you who love her.

Joy is essentially a Christian characteristic, and in this liturgical season the Church does not fail to remind us that it should be present at every moment of our lives. So, on this Laetare Sunday the strictness of the Lenten liturgy is interrupted with words that speak to us of joy. Today, rose-coloured vestments are permitted in place of purple. In this way the Church wishes to remind us that joy is perfectly compatible with mortification and pain. It is sadness and not penance which is opposed to happiness. Taking part to the utmost in this liturgical season which reaches its climax in the Passion, and hence in suffering, we realise that approaching the Cross also means that the moment of our Redemption is coming ever closer. In this way, the Church and each of her children are filled with joy. Therefore, we proclaim in the antiphon

Rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad for her, all you who love her.

Blessed Paul VI wrote of this joy when he stated in his apostolic exhortation "Joy in the Lord"

It is well known that there are different degrees of this 'joy'. Its most noble expression is the cheerfulness or 'happiness' in its strict sense, when someone at the level of his higher faculties finds satisfaction in the possession of a good which is recognised and loved ...

(Think for instance of someone who is highly skilled at playing the piano, like a concert pianist or a hockey player like Johnny Goudreau and Sean Monahan. Think also of people singing in a choir and sharing in the joy of corporate music making.

Blessed Paul VI goes onto observe:

Technological society has succeeded in multiplying the occasions of pleasure, but finds great difficulty in giving birth to joy and happiness. For joy and happiness has its origin elsewhere: it is a spiritual thing. Money, comfort, hygiene, material security may often not be lacking, but nevertheless, despite these advantages, boredom, suffering and sadness are frequently to be found supervening in the lives of many people.

Christians understand these thoughts of the Pope very well. They are aware that joy and happiness stem from a heart that knows itself to be loved by God and which in its turn is in love with him. Moreover, it will be a heart that strives to express its love in deeds, since it knows that deeds are the clearest expression of love.

And we will realise that joy is inseparable from the Cross. Not only that, but we will also understand that we can never be happy if we are not united to Christ on the Cross, and that we will never know how to love if we do not at the same time love sacrifice.¹

It is this theme that is highlighted for us so vividly in our readings for today. These passages declare that we are loved by God and we are to love God in return by lives marked with works that are sacrificial.

God's love for us finds expressions today with a word that governs all the readings. It is found in a phrase in the Old Testament Lesson.

he had compassion on his people

Now this word compassion is tied to an idea that runs throughout the Old Testament that characterizes God as steadfast in his love for his people. He is unwavering, because he has compassion for them. God's compassion is the expression of his kindness, often to someone or some group who is in an unfavorable, difficult, or dangerous situation. His steadfast love and compassion helps to deliver them in some manner. It is often deliverance from situation they are in because of their own bad choices. Indeed, according to Chronicles the people were in a sorry state and in need of God compassion because:

All the leading priests and the people likewise were exceedingly unfaithful, following all the abominations of the nations; and they polluted the house of the LORD which he had hallowed in Jerusalem.

The actions are then described that illustrates God's compassion for his people. First we are told he sent the prophets, repeatedly to the people.

The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent persistently to them by his messengers

What was the peoples' response to the compassion of God?

but they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words, and scoffing at his prophets, till the wrath of the LORD rose against his people, till there was no remedy.

There is reference made here to the wrath of God. This is not God having a temper tantrum. Rather it is God, who in wanting to set things right, will have to take drastic action, just as someone who is terribly ill with cancer will require radical surgery to help eradicate the disease. The next action described, in Chronicles is like this radical surgery, the sacking and burning of the Jerusalem Temple in 597 BC. But then 70 years later under the Persian Rule the Temple will be rebuilt.

¹ Fernandez, Francis (2011-11-30). In Conversation with God – Volume 2 Part 1: Lent & Holy Week (Kindle Locations 2503-2504). Scepter (UK) Ltd. Kindle Edition.

The point that our Old Testament Lesson is conveying to us is that the compassion of God is truly long suffering and finds expression over a historical trajectory that needs to be measured in terms of centuries. The three actions described by Chronicles covered a period of hundreds of years. And even then God was not done in manifesting his compassion. It was a compassion that would find its fulfillment in the Cross so clearly expressed in that famous passage from John 3 where Jesus declared:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.

Here is the message that is to fill us with joy on this Laetare Sunday. As we allow our souls to appropriate this fundamental quality of God's character we will *experience spiritual joy and happiness because of God who is known and loved as our supreme and immutable good.*

It is the compassion of God that leads St. Paul to exclaim:

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ

What is the consequence of this great love? It is our salvation.

⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God— ⁹ not because of works, lest any man should boast.

Those who know the grace of God are people whose lives are then marked by the joy of true humility. Because we have experienced the compassion of God we know that our lives are to be given over to him in loving service. This joy so informs our hearts that we know

we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

Laetare Sunday is all about the Compassion of God made real to us most fully in the death of Jesus Christ and made present to us by His Holy Spirit as we receive his love into our own hearts and lives. Then knowing we are loved by God we may fall more madly in love with him and will embody this love in deeds that express we are his workmanship.