

“REJOICE in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice.” So begins today’s epistle lesson from St. Paul’s letter to the Philippians, chapter 4 beginning at verse 6. Yet as I write this, I cannot help but be aware of the melancholy nature of our existence. I know of two deaths in the past week, one unexpected and one not entirely so, but still the final demise came rather suddenly. I know of individuals looking for work. I know there are a lot of people who are not doing all that well in this world. And yet St. Paul has the nerve to tell us to rejoice always. Really! Well, I’m sure I don’t know who he thinks he is!

Sometimes as Christians, we can be ... oh, let’s say, ... dour. We are warned of the dangers in this life that seek to undermine our confidence and faith. Yesterday we celebrated St. Thomas’ day who is (in)famous for refusing to believe in Jesus simply on the testimony of the other twelve disciples. He said, “Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe.” To this we nod disapprovingly, “Oh that doubting Thomas. I can’t imagine him not believing in the most extraordinary miracle of humanity that ever was!” And yet we too are pessimistic and cynical and, we refuse to believe in the power of God too. If we are truthful with ourselves, we must admit that we are no better than Thomas.

In the final analysis, perhaps we must consider ourselves to be the more guilty of disbelief because we have the testimony of the Testaments, of the Holy Scripture, we have Jesus’ life story right before our eyes whenever we want to read about Him. Yet we live in a mindset of scarcity and clutching. As God’s children, brought into His family by the blood of Jesus Christ, we know that everything that God has is ours. There is no scarcity with God. There may be lack so that we do without for a season. We surely are stretched and tested in this life. But God will supply all of our needs as He sees fit.

It also seems like St. Paul gives us inconsistent instructions in his writing. First He says, “let

your moderation be known unto all men." So here, we are commanded to not be extravagant or flashy. We should not draw attention to ourselves to feed our own egos. We should live with care. And yet just a sentence later, the Apostle says, "Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God." We should live with care, but we should be careful for nothing, we should be without cares.

It seems as if we can't win here. What do we do with this? Well let's take a step back for a moment and return to the broader context in which we read today's lessons. We are at the last Sunday of Advent so Christmas, the celebration of the Incarnation of God in the man Jesus Christ, is just around the corner; it is two days away! Our attention this morning is upon the immanence of Christ, the closeness of Christ, and therefore the closeness of God. God is here in our midst. This is why we sing, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," for God is with us in a way in which he wasn't prior to Jesus' birth.

In the epistle, we read, "The LORD is at hand." In the gospel, John Baptist proclaims, "I baptize with water: but there standeth one among you, whom ye know not; he it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose." There standeth one among you. He it is who is preferred for He is the messiah, the Anointed One, the Christ.

Of course, as Christians, these sayings are all the more real to us, for the Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit, by the redeeming work of Christ for each of us, has taken up residence within us. The LORD indeed is at hand. He is present in all of those who have been baptized into the Church by the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost, One God in three eternal persons.

The implications of this is staggering. Consider that the power that brought all things into being is personally invested in you, in me. We have a friendship with Almighty God. We can talk to Him whenever we want. He always hears us for we have His Spirit right here within us. He is standing, as it were, right here in our midst. Even more than that, He loves us. He knows our struggles, He knows our sins, He knows our wrong-headed thoughts, He knows everything about us, and yet He still loves us. And that love continually calls to us that we would, in turn, love Him more. He gives Himself to us. Will we return His love by giving ourselves ever more fully to Him?

God, in Christ, has re-established Himself as the foundation of our being. In Christ, we return to fellowship with God. We are no longer disobedient children hiding from an angry God whose very presence brings judgment and shame. Rather we now long for the presence of God because Jesus has made us one of the family. In His first Advent God comes down to us in Jesus so that we could ascend to God. We are no longer estranged, but we have been brought near, as near as two persons can get to each other with no barriers and no shame, no fear and no self-consciousness, only joyful giving and receiving. We are new creatures in Christ.

Why then, do Christians have a reputation for being dour? For bringing judgment? For being critical? God loves us all, Christ died for us all, and we should want all men to come to a saving faith in Jesus Christ who is The Way, The Truth, and The Life. No one comes to the Father, but through Jesus Christ alone. Being restored to union with God in Christ by the Holy Spirit is the best thing, the most important thing, and everything else in this world, and in the next for that matter, pales in comparison to the surpassing joy of that unity.

If we are dour and judgmental, it is because we do not have the reality of Jesus at the core of our being. When the Apostle commands us to, "REJOICE in the Lord always: and again I say,

Rejoice," he is telling us to transcend our circumstances, and to put the cares of this world in their proper perspective. What really matters is the love of God for us and the reciprocal fellowship we have with God in Christ Jesus. If Jesus is the foundation of our being, of our identity, then we will have joy that is independent of the troubles we may experience in the world.

Are we to be moderate? Yes we are, but this does not steal our joy. It ensures our joy. Anything that gets in the way of our connection to God, must be avoided. We pursue moderation and careful living so that no sin would make us ashamed to come to God. Similarly, we cast the cares and burdens of this world upon God because we know that He has it handled. We do not want the troubles of this world to consume our attention and draw it from God or undermine the confidence that we have in Him. There surely will be really hard times in every life, but we tackle the responsibilities that we are given to the best of our ability, always knowing that the Lord is at hand. He is with us, and all outcomes are in His hand and will bring us into a greater love with God.

In the Advent season, our focus is on our preparations to receive the gift of God's Son, Jesus, as our Savior at Christmas, but also always with an eye to receiving Him as our final judge. This Sunday we turn the corner from expectation to fulfillment. We enter into the meditation and contemplation of both the Incarnation and the Return of Christ. Surely, we mostly have warm feelings about Christmas, but I wonder if we have such warm feelings about Christ's Second Coming? Many are terrified at this notion. But if we really understand our salvation, that we belong to God and that nothing can separate us from Him, if this reality becomes the central component of our self-identity, then not only will we not fear the return of Christ, but we will long for it. And when Christ appears in power and great glory, we will not cower in the corner in fear, but we will joyously rush to meet Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

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The Fourth Sunday in Advent

K. Bartel, 5

As we turn again this year toward that manger wherein was laid the Son of God, may we approach with reverence and awe. May we approach with anticipation. May we approach with unspeakable Joy for God has become Man. And with all of that reverence, awe, anticipation, and joy, with all of our being, may we long for the return of Our Savior, at which time we, with all the company of heaven, we will evermore laud and magnify His glorious Name.

The Lord is at Hand. Rejoice in Him alway; and again I say Rejoice.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN.