

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT (Year B)

Dec. 11, 2011

(Isaiah 61: 1-2a, 10-11; I Thessalonians 5: 16-24; John 1: 6-8, 19-28)

Introduction

A man dropped dead on the golf course. No one wanted to call his wife and tell her the bad news. Finally one man said he would do his best. So he phoned the wife and said: "Joan, I called to let you know that Richard lost \$5,000 playing poker." The wife hollered: "What! He should drop dead!" The man answered, "Funny you should mention that."

Most of us do find it hard to pass along bad news. Today's readings don't raise that problem though because they are good news; in fact, they call on us to rejoice! In the first reading, the prophet Isaiah says, "The Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed." The Psalm tells us, "My soul magnifies the Lord." St. Paul, in the second reading, says to the Thessalonians: "Rejoice always!"

Two different groups of people today have trouble accepting this message. One group says it can't rejoice because things are so bad. The other group says it doesn't see the point of rejoicing because things are already so good.

First Group: We Can't Rejoice Because Things are so Bad

Take another look at those readings. When Isaiah called on people to rejoice, Israel was still in captivity in Babylon. How could you rejoice in that situation? When Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, saying "Rejoice always" he was facing a lot of opposition and often agonizing over the failures among his own converts. What was there to rejoice about?

Today as we hear the Scriptures telling us to rejoice, we may well find ourselves saying, "What have we got to rejoice about? We're in the midst of a terrible recession. Large numbers of people are out of work. Some are losing their homes. In the wider world we have several terrible wars taking place and the spectre of global warming is hanging over us. In the Church we are facing scandals and many people no longer come to Mass. How can we rejoice in the midst of all this?"

The answer to that question is extremely important because it is what this Advent Season is all about. It is the message that we have a God who cares about us. We have a God who will deliver us. Advent and Christmas celebrate the fact that God has even taken on our human flesh and become one of us. He is here among us in his Church-community. This is the great message of our faith and it is good news. Rejoice!

Second Group: We Don't Need to Rejoice Because Things are so Good

In the early years of the 20th century the French philosopher, Leon Brunschvicq looking at our human accomplishments, declared "Modern man needs no redemption."

This is the voice of those who believe we humans are making great progress and we don't need any help, thank you. Recent books written by aggressive atheists like Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett reveal the fact that today too, in the 21st century, many people, fascinated by our technology, still say: "We don't need religion. We don't need the Church", even "we don't need God."

Yet if we open our eyes and look at the state of our world we see that too many terrible things have happened in the past hundred years for us to take seriously the statement that we don't need redemption. Our recent wars have been the most destructive in history. Much of our highly-praised technology has simply made it easier to kill people. Then consider our culture. Are people happier or more civilized today because of all the things we are now able to shop for? Is family life better now than it used to be? Are our major cities becoming better places to live? Unless we are totally blind, we can see that we need God's guidance and help more than ever. So today, we should be even more ready to hear the good news that our God does come to redeem us. The message of this Advent Season is good news. It is certainly the good news that has sustained me throughout my priesthood.

Our Attitude

What attitude is Advent calling us to have then? Are the readings today assuring us that God will take care of things? Are we being told just to sit back and do nothing? Quite the contrary. Our faith is a call to action. The good news today is that God is here for us, and can change each of us into a saint - but we have to be open to that change and use the means that God provides. God is present to save us, but we have to be people of prayer and discipline.

The message is also that God can save our world - but we need to let God work through us. The Gospel calls on us to reach out to the poor. Work with others to bring about better social and economic conditions. Be active politically. In the midst of it all, look for guidance from the Gospel and the social teaching of our Church. Yet the good news is this: in all of this, rejoice, because we are not just following human plans, or relying on human resources. Our God is here to guide us and sustain us.

Conclusion

When I was just a young priest there was an elderly Italian gentleman in his 90's who used to struggle out to Mass every day. On the way out of Church he would always say to me, "Corragio!" "Courage!" That man had real Catholic faith. Things can be bad. Our efforts can appear to be going nowhere. Yet have courage! Rejoice! Our caring, all-powerful, redeeming God is with us.