

The Church's prayer for Sunday 12th December

God for whom we watch and wait,
you sent John the Baptist to prepare the way of your Son:
give us courage to speak the truth,
to hunger for justice,
and to suffer for the cause of right,
with Jesus Christ our Lord.

Bible Readings and Reflection for Sunday 12th December

A reading from Philippians 4:4-7

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵ Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

A Gospel reading from Luke 3:7-18

⁷ John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸ Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. ⁹ The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

¹⁰ "What should we do then?" the crowd asked.

¹¹ John answered, "Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same."

¹² Even tax collectors came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?"

¹³ "Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them.

¹⁴ Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?"

He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay."

¹⁵ The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. ¹⁶ John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." ¹⁸ And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.



A reflection from Bishop Dagmar Winter, Bishop of Huntingdon

Faithful Creator, whose mercy never fails:

deepen our faithfulness to you and to your living Word, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Dee, dee dee ... ("Don't worry, be happy!" Hit by Bobby McFerrin 1988) Or is the soundtrack for you from Purcell: "Rejoice in the Lord alway!"

Rejoice! writes Paul in the Epistle to the Philippians. Gaudete Sunday, Rejoicing Sunday: having passed the midpoint of Advent, the mood lightens a little, and I *could* even be wearing pink vestments to mark the occasion! Sometimes a pink candle is lit as the third candle (no, it's not the fourth one, pink for Mary as some think, that is a rather more [dare I say sexist] modern idea of pink for girls!).

So to cheer us all up, we have John the Baptist preaching: *You brood of vipers!* If this is John's idea of good news, I'm not sure I want to hear the bad news...

Our readings this week and last focus on John's preaching: a fire-and-brimstone prophet, announcing God's judgment, calling for repentance, and heralding the coming Messiah. All in all, it's a pretty sobering message, beginning with the less-than-endearing "You brood of vipers..." and ending with the no less ominous "...and the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

And gospel writer Luke has the gall to say just after the end of this Sunday's Gospel: "So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the **good** news to the people." ??? How is this good news?

When we already feel battle-worn, maybe losing hope with the state of the world as it is, maybe losing confidence in the faith we are called to proclaim, maybe wondering whether all this Deanery Development stuff is going anywhere anyway...

It is important to note that Paul does not write "rejoice" to others from a comfortable armchair. Rather, at time of writing he himself is in prison for his faith. The Christian faith is not about pontificating about the joy those in despair should be feeling, if only they believed properly! The joy Paul speaks about is not the absence of trouble but the presence of Christ. As Christ is close to those who are in despair, they may discover such joy themselves. Rejoice in the Lord always. The Lord is near.

Our joy in this world is an affirmation of Christ's resurrection and this does not deny the crucifixion. Therefore it is not wrong to rejoice even while elsewhere people are suffering. In a sense such joy only affirms that what is going on in, say, Yemen or Sudan or the border of Europe, is not right. The resurrection is a protest against this.

Paul is writing not to an individual but to a community of Christians. Not an ideal community. There have been and there are problems. People being people, they don't get on from time to time and the same in Philippi. Yes, although they were Christians. Paul mentions two women who have struggled beside him and have done wonderful work of the



gospel with him and others. Yet now, there is some sort of conflict between them. Unlike us so often, Paul doesn't pretend it isn't happening but having urged them to get themselves sorted out, he affirms them as Christian people whose names are in the book of life. He deals with their present problems which must have had some roots in the past, by looking to the future. THEN, immediately, our reading begins and he says: Rejoice.

So we see how Paul's direction of thinking is from the future of God. Invent the future from the future is one of those slogans which actually fits well here. Don't get stuck in the limitations of the past and the here and now but reach out for God's future. I think this is what Bishop Stephen means when he speaks of developing godly ambition for our churches. No one can take away the looking-forward kind of joy. It is this dream of God's future that through the ages has inspired people even in great adversity and oppression to stand up for what God stands for. Not looking back to some 'Golden Age' that maybe never was anyway, pretending that that's where we need to return to, but looking ahead to our home with God in the future. It is this that has led displaced campesinos in Latin America to pray to *God our promised land, Your spirit urges us towards a joyous homecoming*. It is this that has allowed Paul to write about joy while he was in prison.

But back to John the Baptists disturbing call: he is challenging people about the outworking of their faith.

There is one little question that recurs in our passage. It's this: on hearing John's message, a variety of people ask "what should we do?"

They are all asking:

- the crowds (in Luke's Gospel this does mean the poor people),
- the tax-collectors (that means the collaborators with the hated Roman occupiers),
- the soldiers (don't think patriotic army, this means mercenaries).

And John has a very simple message for them. It's not difficult to understand, it's not holier than thou pious waffle.

- the crowds (the poor people): share the little you have
- the tax-collectors (the collaborators): take only what is fair
- the mercenaries: don't practice extortion, don't threaten people.

The good news in that it is all within reach, it's doable. This is what the Prophet Micah said what the Lord requires: act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with your God.

John the Baptist is in that prophetic tradition, not interested in a religious veneer to life but challenging people about the real deal of God.

People are not all expected to become "religious", abstain from anything that's vaguely fun and lead a monastic life. They are asked to get on with their lives but in such a way that they think of others because they live within the framework of God's presence, a divine presence that actually means something. So there is a sense of our whole lives being a prayer in that our whole lives relate to God.



John the Baptist invites all people, including those seen as morally dodgy, he tells them they are all God's children, he invites them, to put it into faith jargon, to participate in the coming Kingdom of God, wherever they are. They have a purpose in life. Because God is present in the ordinary and mundane elements of our lives: this, of course, is part of the Christmas message of the baby in the cradle.

Brothers and sisters, if you feel your confidence failing, remember God is faithful. And remember what we all together were able to achieve when the odds were stacked against us, when we could not meet for worship due to lockdown, when people felt isolated: we were rightly convinced it was for us to respond, and we responded to the call: when we put our minds to it and worked together, we managed to get the whole Diocese, the whole CofE onto the internet. In 2 weeks! Where we did not have the know-how, we went out and sought partners and got it. We created community hubs and enhanced our foodbanks, we made phone calls to those not online - we worked together. When we believe something is important, when we believe in the cause, we can do it!

The Christian faith is an immeasurable treasure for each of us personally, for our communities, for our country. We have every reason to rejoice in the God we know in Jesus Christ – who challenges us hugely, and who loves us more than we can fathom.

This advent, we are called to persistent faithfulness as we await Jesus' coming.

There's no excuse that the Christian faith beyond Sundays is just for special people, people who are "religious". No, it includes you and me, being a child of God, being part of that great worldwide community, building God's kingdom right where we are, having a wonderful liberating purpose in life.

Our faith doesn't have to be heroic, our Christmas celebrations won't have to be ideal, we don't have to be perfect in order to practice faithfulness.

We may even be going through truly tough times.

The joy Paul speaks about is not the absence of trouble but the presence of Christ. And that's assured, it's the reason for the season. So: Gaudete! And again I say: rejoice!

Thanks be to God.