

St. Paul doesn't seem very realistic today when he says, "Rejoice in the Lord always." "Always," he says. And then he says it again, "Rejoice!" "Have no anxiety at all," he says. At all? You can tell St. Paul never had to wrap Christmas gifts.

Nobody rejoices all the time. Even at Christmas parties, people worry about what to wear, what to say, how to get out early, and why the kid at home is still running a temperature.

It is not appropriate to be happy all the time. When someone hurts us, we get angry. When someone dies, we feel sorry. When someone insists we go shopping at one more store, we feel tired. Nothing wrong with those feelings. We don't have to be constantly happy; we don't have to walk around all day in every circumstance looking like we've just swallowed a rainbow.

Still, the third Sunday of Advent tells us to cheer up. We used to call this "*Gaudete* Sunday," meaning "Rejoice Sunday." And if you look at the bottom of page 3 of your missalette, you will see why. The old chant that traditionally begins the mass for this day directly quotes our reading from St. Paul: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice! The Lord is near." Many of us rejoice because Christmas is near, but there's more: The Lord is near. The second coming of Christ is near. Even now, Jesus is near at all times, even when we think he is far away. There is plenty of reason to rejoice.

Incredibly, Paul wrote these words from prison, incarcerated for preaching the gospel. I have learned - visiting prisoners in Cameron for the last two years - that rejoicing always is not something that happens over there. Many of the guys admit that they got themselves in there, but they feel lonely, abandoned, and scorned. How in the world did St. Paul as a prisoner write these words?

It is unrealistic to rejoice in the Lord always, but Paul says it is possible to have no anxiety at all if we do one thing: let God know all our requests. "Then," he says, "the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." Paul doesn't say you receive peace when God grants your requests; he says you receive peace when God knows your requests. That's it.

Everyone has worries, but Paul says you get rid of them by telling them to God. Let God worry. The Lord is near. As for you, rejoice, and rejoice always.