

## 3rd Sunday of Advent

Smileys are some of the most popular emoticons. Some people put one on nearly every piece of communication and even augment their signature with a smiley. Usually the person who reads one smiles, obligingly, but sometimes they just get irritated. People who are not smiling may bark at people who are, “Can’t you get serious about anything?” Sometimes that irritation makes the person who sent the smiley smile again.

Each year the Catholic Church puts a smiley face onto the Third Sunday of Advent. We light the rose-colored candle on the wreath to signify Christmas will soon be here. The opening hymn we used today paraphrases the traditional entrance antiphon for this Mass from Paul’s Letter to the Philippians: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice. Indeed, the Lord is near.” The first word of that antiphon in Latin is *Gaudete*, and that’s what gives this Sunday its nickname.

In that spirit the lectionary provides today a reading from Paul’s First Letter to the Thessalonians, to which our opening hymn also alludes. St. Paul put a smiley face all over this passage. Here, he doesn’t simply say, “Rejoice,” he says, “Rejoice always.... This is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus.” If you’re not in a good mood, Paul’s message may annoy you. There’s plenty of evidence in the New Testament that St. Paul himself did not rejoice always. He got grumpy. He got angry. But this is his advice on carrying out the Christian life: Rejoice always.

Pope Francis issued an apostolic exhortation back in 2013, the first year of his papacy, called “The Joy of the Gospel.” It opens with these words: “The joy of the gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, emptiness and loneliness. With Christ joy is constantly born anew.”

Still, constant joy seems unachievable. In today’s second reading, St. Paul makes even more demands: “Pray without ceasing. In all circumstances give thanks.” Some people make very little time for prayer, and they do not give thanks when they experience physical suffering, dashed dreams, or envy of their neighbor. However, the remedy for sin, sorrow, emptiness and loneliness is not a change in our material condition, but in our spiritual condition. Joy belongs in the heart of every Christian. So does thanks.

This joy is not an isolated emotion insensitive to suffering in the world or in denial that things can go wrong. Instead, joy permeates us because in Christ we have an eternal hope, something that transcends whatever threatens to thwart our happiness. Paul advises constant rejoicing, prayer and thanksgiving in all circumstances. We can’t do this well, so Paul prays for those who read his letter, “May the God of peace make you perfectly holy and may you entirely, spirit, soul, and body, be preserved blameless for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Advent helps us recall the coming of Christ in the past, the birth of a Savior who lifts us from sin and sorrow. Advent looks for his coming again. Advent also invites us to let Christ come today. Let the joy of Christ penetrate wherever we feel sorrow. St. Paul says of joy, prayer and thanksgiving, “This is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus.” Apparently, God likes it when we smile.

Sunday, December 17, 2023