

## REJOICE!

(A Reflection for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent, 13.12.20 by Fr Galadima Bitrus, OSA)

Last Sunday (the 2<sup>nd</sup> of Advent), the theme of the good news of consolation and liberation (*euangelion*) was at the heart of the liturgical readings. On this 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday, the readings focus our attention on the theme of joy. In fact, this 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday is also called “Gaudete” Sunday, a Latin expression meaning “Rejoice.” The liturgical colour is pink or rose, a delicate colour that symbolizes grace, tenderness and joy.

In the 1<sup>st</sup> Reading (Isaiah 61:1-2a.10-11), the prophet Isaiah asserts his prophetic vocation, declaring: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me” (v.1a). He also declares his mission statement as “bringing good tidings to the humiliated.” The prophet goes further to outline his program of action, what we might call his “apostolate” as consisting of binding up wounded hearts, proclaiming release to the captives and liberation to the imprisoned, and a year of the Lord’s grace (vv.1-2a). In other words, the anointed man (*māšīaḥ*) upon whom rests the Spirit of the Lord God (*Rûaḥ Adonai Elohim*), sees himself as a healer of broken hearts, securer of freedom, and one who reconciles. Jesus will later present himself in similar terms (see Luke 4:16-20).

The idea of proclaiming release to captives and the Lord’s year of grace or favour echoes Leviticus 25:10, where it is applied to Israelite farmers who, having lost their land, were forced into servitude. Leviticus stipulates that in the fiftieth year, there shall be restoration, everyone shall regain their land. Deutero-Isaiah applies this concept to Israel as a whole, which in 586 BCE lost its land and was forced into servitude in Babylon. Fifty years after, however, Judeans regained access to their ancestral land following the Edict of Cyrus, king of Persia, which allowed Judeans to leave Babylonia and return home to rebuild both the city of Jerusalem and the temple.

The joy of Judeans over this victorious restoration is aptly expressed across Isaiah 60-61. Jerusalem became once again so glorious and shining that it attracted not only returnees from exile but also foreign nations coming to visit and honour her.

Effectively, restoration of the joy and dignity of a humiliated people characterizes the man upon whom the spirit of the Lord has found its dwelling, the one who has received the Lord’s anointing.

As baptized persons who have received the Spirit of the Lord and his anointing, we are all incorporated into this identity and mission: we are commissioned to be champions of the oppressed and humiliated. We must be for them reliable allies, offering them consolation and audacious hope in the possibility of full and even greater restoration of their dignity, freedom, splendour and joy.

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> Reading (1 Thessalonians 5:16-24), Saint Paul identifies being joyful, prayerful and thankful as God’s will in Christ Jesus for the believers in Thessalonica: “Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances” (vv. 17-18). While he also admonishes them to be open to the working of the Holy Spirit in individuals and not quench it, he calls for discernment, being able to embrace what is good and genuine, and discard what is evil and fake (vv. 19-22). Finally, he prays for the gift of sanctification and wellbeing of spirit, soul and body, assuring

that God who has called them is faithful and will thus bring about such desired spiritual and bodily wellbeing (vv. 23-24).

For a community of new converts coming from two ancient religious traditions of paganism and Judaism, the assurance of God's faithfulness in taking care of their physical and spiritual wellbeing was necessary to ensure that the new Christian community of Thessalonica daily bears witness to its foundational values of the joy of the gospel, and of being a praying and eucharistic (thanksgiving) community.

Last Sunday, we had the Markan account of the presentation of John the Baptist as a prelude to the presentation of Jesus, both figures being placed within Israel's prophetic tradition (Mark 1:1-8). There, Jesus is presented as the messiah and John as his forerunner. In today's Gospel (John 1:6-8.19-28), we have the Johannine account of the presentation of John the Baptist where Jesus is presented as Light and John as one who bears witness to the light. In the Markan account, John identifies Jesus' superiority not only in his (John's) being unworthy to untie the thong of his sandals but also in the fact that while he (John) baptized only with water, Jesus baptized with the Holy Spirit. In the Johannine account we read today, John clearly confesses he is not the Christ, nor the prophet nor Elijah whose return was expected to herald the messianic age (see Malachi 3:23). In a word, he was in no way to be confused with the Messiah and was unworthy of being even the Messiah's servant. He was only a voice calling out for repentance and openness to God's reign.

Clearly, John the Baptist was a prophet and was to Jesus who Elijah was expected to be to the coming Messiah. In fact, Jesus speaks of him in terms reminiscent of the Elijah that was to come before the Messianic age (see Matthew 17:9-13). In some instance, Jesus speaks of him as more than a prophet and the greatest of those born of women (Matthew 11:9-11). John was also certainly not unworthy of untying Christ's sandals. He was even worthy of presenting him to the world and testifying that he is the Lamb of God and Son of God and the one upon whom the Spirit descended (John 1:29.32.34).

But the joy of John the Baptist was in witnessing to Jesus and not himself, in glorifying Jesus and not himself, hence, his motto: "He [Jesus] must increase and I [John] must decrease" (John 3:30). In this, he is an example to all of us who witness to Christ and his gospel: Christ must increase and we must decrease. Or as the psalmist puts it, "Not to us Lord, not to us, but to your name be the glory!" (Psalm 115:1).

May we find joy in witnessing to Jesus and in standing with and for the humiliated and oppressed around us and around the world!

Happy Sunday!