

It's Gaudete Sunday – Gaudete means to rejoice in Latin. But it's not the kind of rejoice that means party hearty, in spite of the rose-colored vestments that break up more somber purple of the ones we associate with Advent. It's the rejoicing we feel at the coming of our savior, the light of the world. And you won't mistake this for feeling lighthearted given the serious tone of our gospel.

This week we have switched from the gospel of Mark to the gospel of John as we do frequently when it comes to exploring the true nature of our Lord and Savior.

John the Baptist himself was no lighthearted character, he was a prophet in the true sense of the word, calling for repentance and condemning the failings of the society around him - something of a cross between Al Gore on the environment and Elizabeth Warren on our financial systems: kind of abrasive, telling uncomfortable truths, and a thorn in the sides of the powers-that-be.

We see him this morning being interrogated by the priests and Levites who are trying to figure out just who he is. He's not very helpful either, giving a catalogue of who he is not and then paraphrasing bit from Isaiah about being the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, which we read last week. John's answers remind me of the fellow who came into the Thrift Shop wanting to buy a suit because he was running

for governor. You might have it read about this episode in last month's newsletter. It seems to beg the question: how do we tell the true prophet from the true nut job?

In any case John's answers do little to mollify the priests and the Levites who get a little fierce with John and ask rather pointedly, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet? For which we can read "ok buddy if you aren't anybody important what gives you the right to baptize anyone? John's response is a model of self-deprecation. John apparently possesses self-knowledge that we can all admire. He knows what he is and he is all grown-up about it. He is not the light, he came to testify to the light. John is a witness to the light. He baptizes so that people may be prepared to see the light. You have to wonder how he felt about standing in the shadow of the light to come. On the other hand it may be easier to accept not being top dog if you know that you have your own place in the scheme of things, especially something as important as the salvation of the world.

There's a bitter-sweet quality to this passage then because we know what will happen to John as well as the promise of what is to come, the one who stands as yet unknown among the people of first century Palestine, the one who will change the world and who will also be put to death.

As Christians this is the triumph of the Lord foretold in our reading from Isaiah, one of those sparkling passages of prophecy that proclaims the day when the Lord will take vengeance on the enemies of Zion and bring good news to the oppressed, solace for the brokenhearted, liberty for the captives, and release to the prisoners. In the gospel of Luke this is the passage that Jesus reads in the synagogue in Nazareth and concludes by saying that this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. But at the time this prophecy was written it was meant to encourage a people who had been taken prisoner by the Babylonian Empire. This vision of restoration calls for ruined cities to be rebuilt, for justice to prevail over wrong-doing, and for the restored nation regain its lost prestige.

What might that restoration look like for us today? Our hopes are probably not so very different although the actual images of true restoration would be quite different. Maybe here in America we might look to shattered dreams and programs of times gone by when our cities might truly gleam, undimmed by human tears, when education would be available to all and minds would not be wasted, or lives lost to drugs, when cancer would be defeated, and peace and harmony would prevail. You can add what you would like or if you really want to be bold you could try to imagine what the world will be like when it is fully restored when Christ comes again.

I confess that I still feel like there is dissonance in the association of these two passages. Granted the Old Testament and the gospel don't always work together but these feel like they are pulling in opposite directions. It's like when you go to a movie expecting a happy ending and or at least some clear resolution and instead you leave feeling vaguely depressed and wondering why you spent the \$15 or \$20 dollars to go in the first place.

This is where we need to look at the psalm for a solid reminder that life is like that; life is full of dissonance. Frequently there are no happy endings although there usually joyful moments along the way, times of satisfaction in the work we have done and the people we have known and loved. At the same time we are frequently left with the disquietude of unresolved issues and relationships that didn't work out the way we had planned.

The psalm is a short one. It begins with the remembrance of the liberation from Babylon. This was a joyful time for the people of Israel they had been given permission to return to their homeland, to rebuild the walls and the temple in Jerusalem. God was to be praised. The people were thankful and they looked forward to the future. Then at the end of the fourth verse the verb tenses change. Now I usually don't go into such detail about specific words but it is important here because in the first four verses the psalmist was describing history.

Beginning in the fifth verse the psalmist is asking God to restore their fortunes and expressing hope that in the future that the present conditions of tears will change to joy.

What just happened here?

Reality.

In a word, reality set in.

The people had returned to Israel and the difficulties of rebuilding their lives, of dealing with the foreigners who had moved in and the remnants who had moved up the social scale began to set in. There was conflict and strife and life was not changed back to the way it had been. This reminds me of what happened in Great Britain after the end of World War II. Yes, the war was over but some cities were in ruins, the people would suffer more years of deprivation and rationing until industries were rebuilt. In addition society began to change, the dead were still dead, the wounded still needed to be cared for, and the Empire, well the Empire began to dissolve and Great Britain was no longer the power player that it had been. Victory was not hollow but it was not filled with unmitigated joy either.

But then, it's Advent, Advent, that season that is at once penitential and anticipatory, joyous with the expectation of the birth of the Christ child, and a bit anxious with the threat of final judgment -

even in the promise of restoration to come. That's where faith comes in. As our collects says, we are sorely hindered by our sins and by what we do not yet know about the second coming. So for the moment let us take the advice Paul offers in his letter to the Thessalonians when he says, "Rejoice always ...May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this."

Amen.