

St Mary and St Peter's Church, Sunderland

Pontus Bramberg

3rd Sunday of Advent, AD 2022

May I speak in the name of God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, rejoice. Let your moderation be known unto all men: for the Lord is at hand. Be careful for nothing: but in every thing by prayer let your requests be made known unto God [Phil 4:4-6]. Lord, thou art become gracious unto thy land: thou hast turned away the captivity of Jacob [Ps 85:1].

In the liturgical history of the Western Church, these words, taken from the letter of St Paul to the Phillipians and from the 85th Psalm, were sung in the beginning of this day's Mass. Indeed, this Third Sunday of Advent is sometimes called Gaudete Sunday, 'gaudete' being the Latin word for 'rejoice'. Together with the Fourth Sunday of Lent, called Laetare Sunday, 'laetare' also being translated as 'rejoice' (although there is a subtle difference in meaning and grammar which is, believe it or not, unimportant for our purposes today). Both these Sundays provide 'breaks' of rejoicing within the otherwise penitential seasons of Advent and especially Lent. In some churches this is further marked by replacing the purple liturgical colour with rose, mixing in some of the celebratory white colour in the penitential purple. This rejoicing in the midst of penance should certainly not be forgotten but in our world there are tendencies to completely disregard Advent as a penitential or even an anticipatory season. Christmas celebrations seem to be starting earlier each year that passes and at this time almost completely overshadow the preparatory season of Advent; to some extent this is an understandable development in an increasingly secular world and it is easy for all of us to be caught up in it. I would however like to ask each and everyone of you to take a step back and ponder how much more meaningful the celebration of the Nativity of Our Lord becomes after a season of preparation. This is not to say that Advent and Lent are the same, in fact some will argue that Advent is not penitential at all but merely anticipatory and the penitential character of Advent is certainly lesser than that of Lent just as the celebration of the Nativity at Christmas is lesser than the celebration of the Resurrection at Easter. It is also true that the character of Advent is one of expectation and anticipation, but this properly must include some form of penance. Today, however, some celebration is added to this penance: the purple of penance is mixed with the white of celebration to turn into rose.

I am conscious that until this point I have not directly touched on the words of St Matthew in today's Gospel but I thought a brief foray into the liturgical calendar was warranted on this most special Sunday of rejoicing in the midst of our Advent penance. This theme of rejoicing in the midst of penance is not however entirely disconnected from the words of the Evangelist. John the Baptist is being held prisoner when he hears the joyous

word of the Lord's work. When he hears of Christ he sends his disciples to ask Christ if He is the one who is to come, or if they are to wait for another. That the Forerunner, John the Baptist, should ask this at first seems curious; after all, it seems that he should already know the answer. As Luke tells us he leaped in his mother's womb when the Blessed Virgin, then pregnant with Christ, visited. St Matthew also seems to indicate that John already knows Our Lord's identity in the third chapter of his Gospel when the Forerunner preaches of the coming of the Messiah [Matt 3:3] and only consents to baptise the Lord after saying 'I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?' [Matt 3:14]. Having said this and having baptised the Lord, the heavens were opened, the Spirit of God descended like a dove, and a voice from heaven said 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased' [Matt 3:16-17]. It seems that it would be abundantly clear to John at this point that Jesus is in fact the Christ of God, the one who is to come. The reason for his question seems to be that Our Lord at this point was not fulfilling what John the Baptist was expecting of the Messiah; recall that the Forerunner called people to repentance proclaiming to the Pharisees and Sadducees:

'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. "I baptise you with water for repentance, but the one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire' [Matt 3:7-12]

In this rather lengthy quote it seems that the Baptiser, probably like most Jews at the time, was expecting the Messiah to come with fire and brimstone. Jesus, at least up until this point, has seemingly not lived up to this expectation, having previously called His disciples to love their enemies [Matt 5:44] and warning them about judging [Matt 7:1]. The Lord thus sends the messengers back to John and proclaims the highest praise to him, exalting him above all 'those born of women' [Matt 11:11].

Does this mean that the Forerunner was wrong in his expectation that the Messiah will come with fire and brimstone? Not at all. The ministry of healing, the raising of the dead, and good news for the oppressed are all foretold by Isaiah in today's Old Testament reading and throughout his prophecy [e.g. Isa 26:19, 29:18, 61:1]. Christ is fulfilling biblical prophecy throughout His ministry, establishing without a doubt that He is the Messiah, the Anointed One. He exercised, and indeed continues to exercise, this ministry out of love for the world. This requires the Baptiser to somewhat reevaluate his understanding of the Messiah; instead of expecting Him to immediately judge those who oppress Israel he must come to terms with a Messiah who offers his blessing to anyone who takes no offence at Him. The Lord did not live up to John's expectations but John did not allow that to be a stumbling block for his faith (interestingly, the word translated as offence can also be translated as stumbling block). But make no mistake: John was absolutely right in foretelling the judgement of the world. When the Lord comes again, the righteous will have their heavenly reward and the unrighteous will have their punishment of eternal unquenchable fire. We do not know when the Lord returns and

must always be vigilant and faithful to Him, keeping His commandments and repenting of our sins because not one of us is righteous by our own merits. There is unlimited forgiveness for them that truly repent and believe in the Gospel. Nothing of this world can save us, only Christ.

This is summed up by the Book of Common Prayer in the Second Collect at Evening Prayer, which I would like to end with:

O God, from whom all holy desires, all good counsels, and all just works do proceed: Give unto thy servants that peace which the world cannot give; that both our hearts may be set to obey thy commandments, and also that by thee we being defended from the fear of our enemies may pass our time in rest and quietness; through the merits of Jesus Christ our Saviour.

Amen.