

Gaudete Sunday

By God's Grace may I speak in the name of the God who was and is and is to come. Amen.

The readings and themes for Advent in the church tend to be rather gloomy. Today's gospel reading is also full of judgement, nothing overly cheery. But then there is our reading from Zephaniah and you might have noticed that it has a markedly different tone. It's a call to rejoice, full of hope. That's quite different from the typical Advent doom and gloom. The reason is that today is Gaudete Sunday. Now some of you might know very well what Gaudete Sunday is, I had no clue about it, until I started to work for the Church of England and learned all sorts of curious and wonderful things. Gaudete is a Latin word and means "rejoice". The third Sunday in Advent, Gaudete Sunday, is a call to rejoice during this season that speaks an awful lot about judgment, end times and how everything and everyone is not quite up to scratch.

During Advent we are called to prepare ourselves for the coming of Christ by voices like that of John the Baptist, calling us to repent from the ways in which we fall short of loving God and our neighbour and to seek and do justice. So why is there suddenly Gaudete Sunday calling us to rejoice in the middle of this? Gaudete is a reminder to us, that doom and gloom are not the heart of the gospel. The heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ are hope and redemption.

During Advent we confront the truth that there is a lot of brokenness in our lives and in our world. We acknowledge that there is plenty of darkness in the world. I really appreciate that. The Christian faith has good news at its heart, it's all about hope and joy, because Jesus Christ came, died and rose again. But neither Jesus nor the bible tell us

that all we have to do is believe and then it will be all fine, all smooth sailing from here on. There is still brokenness and hurt in this world and in us. And it is ok to feel the pain, anger and sadness about that. That's why times in the church year like Advent are so good and healthy, because they acknowledge that it is not all wonderful and great just yet. It is ok for us as Christians to not always feel happy and joyful, even though at the heart of our faith there is good news, full of joy and hope. It is ok at times to simply feel the pain, the sadness and anger in the face of injustice, in the face of the pain and suffering of our own brokenness.

The book of Zephaniah is all about judgement, full of prophecies that speak of destruction and the downfall of nations because of their injustices and rebellion against God. Our reading today though is from the end of the book, where there is suddenly a call to rejoice, a promise of redemption despite all of it. Reading the book of Zephaniah this can give you a bit of whiplash, it's all: Everything is lost, and we are all doomed. God's coming to judge you, and it will be your downfall and then all of a sudden the tone completely changes:

**I will remove disaster from you,
so that you will not bear reproach for it.
I will deal with all your oppressors
at that time.
And I will save the lame
and gather the outcast,
and I will change their shame into praise
and renown in all the earth.
At that time I will bring you home**

How are we to make sense of this? Is this the same God in whose authority John the Baptist speaks, when he preaches about felling trees

and unquenchable fires as images for God's judgement? Yes, it is. Because God doesn't make light of injustice, evil, pain and suffering. God is determined to root all of it out. But this judgement of God is not about punishment or destruction, it's about restoration. That's why after all that tough judgement talk from St John the Baptist in our gospel reading, it nonetheless ends with "he proclaimed the good news to people."

That's because God's judgment is unlike our justice system, where the law breakers get punished, but it is rarely if ever possible to make things right for the victims. God's judgement is not about punishing people, but about making things right, restoring what has been broken. God's justice is different. God's judgement has at its heart the will to make things right for the victims and to protect them. And it doesn't simply give up on the perpetrators but aims to bring them to repentance and a life lived in the love and grace of God. This is why we have hope, this is why even when things are dark for us, because of the brokenness in our lives and in our world, we can have hope. Even amidst the doom and gloom, we have reason to rejoice. We might not feel like it all the time, and that is fine. As long as we know that there is nonetheless hope, because Christ is coming to bring judgement, redemption and healing for all the world.

So, while Advent sombrely acknowledges and reminds us that not all is well just yet, that we still live in a world where pain and suffering are all too real, Gaudete Sunday is a reminder to us that even though not all is well, redemption is coming. Despite everything we have reason to hope and rejoice. It's ok to be sad and angry at times, there is room for that in the Christian faith and in church. But even as we go through the rough patches of our lives, we get to hold on to hope and joy, because Christ is coming to restore and redeem all things. So, we can rejoice as we wait for His coming. Amen