

Sunday Sermon

Revd Canon Charles Jenkin – 13th December 2020

Isaiah 61.1-4,8-11; Psalm 126; 1 Thessalonians 5.16-24; John 1.6-8,19-28

Today, the third Sunday in Advent, is known as Rejoicing Sunday. “Rejoice always,” goes our first reading for today. Rejoicing Sunday comes midway through what traditionally was a sombre and penitential season of preparation for the great festival of Christmas. Party-loving Christians, it seems though, are too weak to endure a whole month of being properly penitential, so we do need a Sunday off from the gloom in order to minister to our human weakness. Hence the pink Advent candle for today. Pink, it seems, is the colour of encouragement and rejoicing.

More seriously and spiritually, Rejoicing Sunday is about getting the overall balance of the Advent season right. Yes, repentance is an entirely proper part of preparing for God to act, essential even, but so also is rejoicing, rejoicing that help is surely on the way. Advent very much contains both of these spiritual movements, repentance and rejoicing. They go together, and they are both about our encouragement.

Today, as a country, it looks as though we are going to need it. The good news of course is that effective Covid vaccines are on the way. There is much rejoicing about that, and rightly so. The more difficult news is about avoiding a hard Brexit, and we have heard that the Government is preparing for a nightmare scenario of a third lockdown, a No Deal Brexit, and severe winter flooding. Possibly.

Not, I think, that there will be much repentance and penitence about it all. Much blaming of politicians of course, but not much repentance; about not facing up to hard realities, and not keeping the Covid rules. It looks like the EU has decided for the time being to play hard cop, to bring home to everyone, not just the Brits but really more as a warning to others, that leaving the EU is hard road for any nation that chooses to do it. It's not that the EU doesn't understand the British desire for sovereignty; we are being made an example of, to encourage the others. T'was ever going to be thus.

So we could all do with some encouragement and rejoicing along this hard winter road. And it is out there. Lone voices crying out distantly in the wilderness, assuring us that help is on the way, even if we can't see it yet. The vaccines will succeed. The EU will eventually decide that they can do business again with the UK. The floods will subside. Summer will come and, after counting the cost, we will be able to face the future together, if we can bury all our disappointments and disagreements. And there will perhaps be both repentance and rejoicing, alongside grieving at all the losses.

The spiritual discipline of rejoicing is always good and helpful, because it encourages us to look for the light, the light at the end of the tunnel, rather than just raging at the darkness. The spiritual discipline of always rejoicing, and it is a spiritual discipline, is not about denying present feelings or situations. It is about restoring a right balance, and Advent balance. It's about living in the light; in the sight of that sure light in the distance. The spiritual discipline of always rejoicing, is about reminding us not to trash our relationships amid current

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difficulties, because we will need to walk together in the light again, and actually we need each other now too.

Christians have a handle on this because above all we believe in the faithfulness of the light of the world, the light at the end of tunnel. The one who calls you is faithful, affirms St Paul in our first reading. John the Baptist bore witness to this light, as our Gospel reading proclaims. The message is, amid all the challenges of the day, do not lose heart. Do not lose heart in all the senses of that word. Do not despair. Do not stop caring. Do not fall into bitterness and anger. For the light is already there, and it will surely come. We are called always rejoice now, in that sure hope. It is actually what the season of Advent is really all about.

CJ. 13.12.20