

12-17-23 B Advent 3 Gaudete
Fr. Joseph

The third Sunday of Advent is known as Gaudete Sunday, the Sunday of Rejoicing. On this Sunday we light the rose colored candle and, if we had a rose-colored set, the altar and the altar party would be decked out in rose-colored vestments. Before anyone gets the idea that I'm agitating for rose-colored vestments . . . I'm not. You only get to wear them twice a year, and I don't look that great in pink. I'm thrilled we have a Sarum Blue set for Advent.

From Ancient times, the Church has celebrated the season of Advent as a time of preparing for Christ's coming. The season emphasizes the longing for God that exists in every human heart. There are many facets of that longing. There's the longing towards the joy of new birth and new life which we celebrate at Christmas time. There's both the longing for and the dread of Christ's fulfillment in the world at the end of the age, and at the end of our own lives. Then, there's that deep longing that

we all carry to know Christ's presence within us on a daily basis.

But today on Gaudete Sunday we get a day off from all the preparation and anticipation. Today we hear Paul's words from the earliest book of the New Testament, I Thessalonians, reminding us that, while we're waiting and preparing for Christ's coming, we should:

"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."

If Christians were known by just those three things, the kingdom of God would be popping up everywhere, like dandelions in on a Spring lawn: Rejoice *always*; Pray *without ceasing*; Give thanks *in all circumstances*.

Why would I rejoice *always*? I rejoice when OU wins. I rejoice when I see we've got some money left over after

paying our bills. I rejoice when my child, the musician, is busy doing music. I rejoice when the sermon is finally written and I can go to bed. But rejoice always? Why?

I have to admit, I began to understand this one in my head a long time before I began to experience it in my heart. It has to do with experiencing God's Presence around me and even in me (which is amazing, because I'm not very holy - quite the opposite). It has to do with my ever-growing awareness of God's Presence around and in all of you (and not because any of you are particularly holy, either). It isn't just some sweet, ooey-gooney feeling; it is a definite awareness of the Presence of God, my Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer. Rejoicing is just the natural response to that awareness, especially, knowing how undeserving I am.

What about the second, praying without ceasing? We tend to think of prayer as offering praise or asking for something. We get accustomed to praying when we want

or need something, or when we are afraid . . . but, without ceasing? All the time? A former Baptist who once told me that she was totally lost when she first encountered the idea of ceaseless prayer: “I mean, what do you say? Uh, thank you for my new car . . . I could use some help with the teenagers . . .”

But ceaseless prayer is not as hard as it seems. When you become aware of God’s constant Presence your whole life becomes a dialogue with God. And it isn’t just with words: Everything you do, everything you say, everything you feel becomes an interaction with the Presence of God. In my own personal practice, I sometimes repeat this simple prayer over and over to get myself centered in the present: “Blessed are you, Lord God; blessed are you.” The trick is remembering that the One you are addressing is above and through and in all things and is present with you. When you gain that awareness, your whole life enters into an ongoing dialogue with the Lord.

Personally, I think the last of Paul's exhortations, "Give thanks in all circumstances," is the hardest of all for most to wrap their heads around. But remember, every week we recall that Jesus, knowing that he is about to be crucified, takes a moment to *give thanks* for the bread which is about to be broken, and thanks for the cup about to be spilled.

Most of us, if we live long enough, come to a point where we realize that every horrible thing that has ever happened to us has also enriched us and revealed something vitally important to our souls. I want to be very careful here; because I don't want anyone to leave here thinking that I believe some pollyanna-ish notion that no matter how horrible some experience is or was, 'you will someday see it was all for the best.' Absolutely not. Any of a million tragedies can leave you scarred with wounds that will never heal.

To the contrary, what I think Paul was saying when he wrote that we should give thanks in all circumstances, was that even the wounds we bear can become sacred if we offer them to God's service -- beginning with the wounds that Christ bore in his hands and his feet for all us . . . and maybe, not least of all, the wound that God bears in his heart for all of us. I doubt very seriously that Jesus sits around in heaven thinking, "I really like these wounds in hands and feet!" But I bet he gives thanks constantly that so many have been blessed because of his wounds.

Rejoice always! Pray without ceasing! Give thanks in all circumstances! It all rests upon knowing that God is with us in all the trials and tribulations of life. How do you acquire the knowledge of God's Presence? By getting to know Jesus Christ as he is revealed in scripture, tradition, the witness of his saints, and, most especially, in prayer. It's worth all the effort. Becoming aware of God's Presence with us is what Christmas is all about. ("Blessed are you, Lord God; blessed are you.")

Remember that passage from Isaiah? For behold, a young girl shall conceive and bear a son and shall call his name, Emmanuel? It means, "God with us." So, Rejoice! God is with us. God with us in ceaseless prayer. God with us in constant thanksgiving. It is worth all the preparation and anticipation of this season!