

Rejoice! Advent 3 Gaudete Sunday 2018

‘Rejoice and exult with all your heart,’ Zephaniah calls across the centuries to us, and St Paul takes up the theme: ‘rejoice in the Lord always and again I say rejoice’. Many of us are hearing the music of Henry Purcell pulsing behind those dancing words. Today is Gaudete Sunday, a pause to rejoice in the Advent season, when the liturgical colour is rose for churches lucky enough to have the vestments, and we think of the wilderness blooming like a rose at the coming of Christ. Here at the Minster we lit a rose candle on our advent wreath.

But how many of you are able to inhabit that joy this morning? After a week in our national life in which we thought we were having a Parliamentary vote to decide our future, which was then withdrawn, and shuttlings by our Prime Minister to and from Brussels many of us are sunk in dull despair, unsure of where we shall be next year. And to cap it all, the climate change talks are stalling. To be honest, my heart is in my boots. Even my students, who tend to live in a university bubble, with only intermittent awareness of the world outside, were deeply affected this week. After all, it is their generation who will have to cope with the future.

It is not for me to be party or Brexit political up here, but we can, I think, unite in feeling we need leaders more like John the Baptist. He would never have made a practical politician and his sharp criticism of the powers-that-be led to his summary execution. But he spoke out of a vision of what the world should be like and could be like. His baptising and preaching were all in the service of an authority beyond his own. He calls the Jews of his day to a common decency that we too could benefit from. He stands against corruption in his advice to tax collectors, against brutality and abuse of power, and for simple sharing of food and clothing. Fairness and justice are his watch-words. There is no enlightened self-interest here or being out for what you can get. Like the prophets before him, he calls his nation to solidarity and a common

standard, and to a good that is not dependent on what they or their rulers happen to like or want, but what God demands, who is all good. There is something beyond our own ideas of right that calls us to account, and grounds our conduct.

‘The Lord is near’ is the common voice of all three readings this morning. The Lord is at hand to reveal to us the way. In the presence of the Messiah, says John, all that is wrong, selfish and shabby, will be consumed like chaff in the winnowing process of harvest. It will disappear: poof! Gone! In the same way, somehow, in the morass of words and insults which is our public conversation and deliberation at the moment, we must raise our eyes from the chaff to ask: what vision of our common good do we all seek? Stop just telling Brexiteers or Remainers that they are wrong-headed and ask each other. What is behind your decision? What vision of our common life drives it? How do you want to live? What is the good sought beyond the positions?

We are so divided, like warring tribes, but believe me, there is somewhere, somehow, as it says in Sondheim’s lyrics of *West Side Story*, ‘a place for us’, for us all, where those divergent desires can be reconciled. That is what the Common Good tradition, which is central to Christian ethical thinking, teaches and other faith traditions teach as well. We do not have to be endlessly pitting rival desires against each other. There is a solution in which the hopes and dreams of security and jobs, of friendship and solidarity with our European neighbours and national pride and identity can be reconciled. This tradition has withered in our public conversation because it does require a beyond - God, the Good that stands over us – to compel us beyond real politique. Our bishops rightly call us to reconciliation, but it will only work if it is grounded in that call beyond ourselves that we call the Common Good and was formerly part of the intercession rubric in the Alternative Service Book, if you can remember back that far.

John’s baptism was for repentance: a new start and a change of direction away from self-interest. The baptism of the Spirit and fire that Jesus brings is

far deeper. It makes us one with him and with each other. There is no longer an autonomous ‘self’ to be self-interested: we are one body. Indeed, we become most individual and beautifully particular through this unity: it does not cancel difference but renders it peaceable. Your gifts and skills complement mine: we are not in competition. This unity will only be complete at his second coming, when our lives will become like a piece of exciting and beautiful music. Yet this kingdom exists now when we meet and pray together in the peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit, and when we seek that common good. The Kingdom tingles in our fingers: it presses on us like the velvety fall of a summer’s evening. It is there in the stars above ranked in their lovely patterns looking down on us in the icy December midnight. We can unlock sources of joy even in this impossible deadlock. It awaits our coming to realisation.

Advent is a time of darkness, especially as we approach the solstice, but as the nights close in our minds can expand. Everything in nature is poised waiting: ‘the air is humming’ to quote *West Side Story* again from the Jets’ song, ‘something good is coming’. It is a close tie with *Carousel* but *West Side Story* is my favourite musical because although like the Romeo and Juliet story upon which it is based, it ends in tragedy, it is full of hope. As the Jets sing about this good thing: ‘Who knows?

It's only just out of reach,
Down the block, on a beach.’

But Maria and Toni’s song, ‘Somewhere’ speaks most directly to our situation. From rival gangs and deathly enemies they come to love each other, and their song is one of the Common Good that we need so desperately today.

There's a place for us,
Somewhere a place for us.
Peace and quiet and open air

Wait for us

Somewhere.

There's a time for us,

Some day a time for us,

Time together with time to spare,

Time to look, time to care,

Some day!

Somewhere.

We'll find a new way of living,

We'll find a way of forgiving

Somewhere,

Somewhere . . .

There's a place for us,

A time and place for us.

Hold my hand and we're halfway there.

Hold my hand and I'll take you there

Somehow,

Some day,

Somewhere!

We do not only have the wistfulness of those who long for the full second coming of Christ and his kingdom. We have found here 'a new way of living' and we have been forgiven. In a few minutes we shall take each other's hand in peace, and we shall break bread together and share wine, living here and now the joy of Christ with us in his body and blood which makes us one, in the 'somewhere'. And as we leave in the peace of Christ let us take what the words of Purcell's anthem following the Authorised Version of the Bible translate as not gentleness but 'moderation', that tempering of our public conversation. 'Let your moderation be known unto all men. The Lord is at hand'. Let us call our

leaders, our neighbours, to the moderating of the Common Good, because only there will we all find that joy.

So, despite everything, we can truly join St Paul's prayer: 'Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, rejoice'. For as Zephaniah prophecies, 'you shall fear disaster no more' and God 'will renew you in his love'. Amen to that.