Of Signs and Gifts

3rd Sunday of Advent

December 15th, 2019

*Gaudete, gaudete! Christus est natu Ex Maria virgine, gaudete! Tempus adest gratiæ Hoc quod optabamus, Carmina lætitiæ Devote reddamus. Deus homo factus est Natura mirante, Mundus renovatus est A Christo regnante. Rejoice, rejoice! Christ is born Of the Virgin Mary Rejoice! The time of grace has come—What we have wished for; Songs of joy Let us give back faithfully. God has become man, With nature marvelling, The world has been renewed By the reigning Christ.* These words come from the Renaissance hymn *Gaudete,* first recorded in a Swedish-Finnish book in 1581. It proclaims the secret of Advent. Our God is a God of joy. The very birth of Christ proclaims this joy of God for His creation that He makes, shapes and redeems. Wisdom calls out in the Proverbs, saying: “When he assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress his command, when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like a master worker; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world

and delighting in the human race” (Proverbs 8:29-31). The Lord is the proud Father who declares *This is my beloved Son*. The Gospel begins with the joy of miraculous birth, just as all of creation began with miraculous birth the moment God said *Let there be light.* Nature herself is an icon of the divine felicity. And even on the eve of His Passion, Jesus declared that salvation would come in the same way his birth had come: “Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy. When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you” (John 16:20-22).

The gospel comes to us with signs and gifts that proclaim the joy of waiting on God, of expecting His miraculous creation and recreation. Joy is a type of faith and hope; one might even say joy is the way to love. A heart that cannot rejoice cannot really love. Joy observes what is taking place and rejoices in the mystery unfolding; joy seizes each moment in gratitude as a moment in the sanctuary of God’s presence. Joy gives to itself before the promised gifts even arrive—it trusts and knows that the gifts to come and the path to those gifts both arrive from the greatest gift, our Lord. God is the greatest gift to His own creation, and He sees creation as the greatest gift to Himself. The gospel itself is a proclamation of this joy. In fact, the poet Prudentius from 6th Century Spain would go so far as to suggest that the church is essentially a choir singing the praises of God with us:

*Corde natus ex Parentis*

Of the Father’s love begotten

Ere the worlds began to be,

He is Alpha and Omega,

He the source, the ending, He,

Of the things that are, that have been,

And that future years shall see,

Evermore and evermore.

O that Birth forever blessed!

When the Virgin full of grace,

By the Holy Ghost conceiving,

Bare the Saviour of our race,

And the Babe, the world’s Redeemer,

First reveal’d His sacred face,

Evermore and evermore.

Thee let old men, Thee let young men,

Thee let boys in chorus sing;

Matrons, virgins, little maidens,

With glad voices answering;

Let their guileless songs re-echo,

And the heart its music bring,

Evermore and evermore.

In this hymn, joy is the very continuum of eternity and time, evermore and evermore: “O that Birth forever blessed!” Joy comes to the world through the eternal begetting of the Son from the love of the Father. In many ways the spiritual life calls us to be like Mary, to give birth to Christ in our lives by the power of the Holy Spirit, to be transformed by this birth, as we learn from Rainer Maria Rilke’s *Book of Hours* and the apostle Paul. And the very birth of the “Babe, the world’s Redeemer” commands us to sing—old men, young men, boys, matrons, virgins, little maidens all “with glad voices answering…let their guileless songs re-echo…And the heart its music bring, evermore and evermore.” The church is to be a choir of “guileless songs” pouring forth the music of hearts ignited with love and joy for the birth of our Saviour, for the continuing birthing of the new heaven and new earth promised through the Only Begotten! This is a picture of the church we find in the Benedictine tradition and in the Book of Revelation itself; we are made a heavenly choir, the orchestra of the Holy Spirit. All of us sing in different ways and different tones with our unique voices, but it is the one song of creation and redemption, the son of the Word made flesh. I imagine we would say it was easier for those simplistic, unenlightened minds of the early middle ages to rejoice in such a way. Aurelius Prudentius Clemens lived in the mid 5th to early 6th Century, the time of history that saw his native Spain overrun by Suebi, Vandals and Visigoths carving Iberia into smaller kingdoms. The decay and destruction of the western Roman Empire occurred before his very eyes. The birthplace of Seneca, Hadrian, Trajan and Martial was lost to barbaric hordes and their barbarism. In another two hundred years, the Ummayad Caliphate would overrun Spain again, renaming it Al-Andalus, colonizing it for the next four to seven hundred years, depending on the region. Prudentius came from a land of lostness, a land of waiting and hoping. Nevertheless, he rejoiced and worked hard till the day he died. He started his career as a lawyer, then retired into an ascetic life of composing poetry, writing works of devotion and apologetics. As late as the 13th Century, he was regarded as the equal of the Roman poets Horace and Statius. Our exhortation to joy does not come from a naïve, poorly instructed idealist living a soft life, but from an experienced and educated man, one of the last lights of classical antiquity at the dawn of the dark ages. In the elegance and beauty of his poetry, he lived out what James enjoins in his epistle: “Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord” (James 5:7-10). One of the gifts of the Advent is that, whether we are suffering or relaxing, we can wait for the precious crop, we have an opportunity to light up the world with our expectation and joy, to flourish through patience, to wait upon the coming of the Lord, who is always near and rejoices in us.

Coelius Sedulius, the Irish hymnist we examined in the first week of Advent, also demonstrates that joy comes in the midst of suffering. This was evident in the very nativity story. In his hymn *Hostis Herodes impie*, he sings:

When Christ’s appearing was made known,

King Herod trembled for his throne;

But he who offers heavenly birth

Sought not the kingdoms of this earth.

The eastern sages saw from afar

And followed on his guiding star;

By light their way to Light they trod

And by their gifts confessed their God.

Within the Jordan’s sacred flood

The heavenly lamb in meekness stood

That he, to whom no sin was known,

Might cleanse his people from their own.

O what a miracle divine,

What water reddened into wine!

He spake the word, and forth it flowed

In streams that nature ne’er bestowed.

All glory, Jesus, be to thee

For this thy glad epiphany:

Whom with the Father we adore

And Holy Ghost for ever more.

Into the murdering, dark world of Herod, the Christ comes, vulnerable, yet already triumphant, already bringing hope. The time of loss is a time of gifts. Christ brings transformation into the process of waiting and sojourning on earthly pilgrimage: “O what a miracle divine, what water reddened into wine! He spake the word, and forth it flowed. In streams that nature ne’er bestowed. All glory, Jesus, be to thee, for this thy glad epiphany.” Even after Jesus began his ministry, the very one who proclaimed his coming seemed to have doubts, as we read in our gospel text today: “When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me” (Matthew 11:2-6). Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at the one born in Bethlehem, the one who suffered on the cross, the one who rose again to bring us true life. The only renewal the church can expect is a renewal that comes from rejoicing in the one who brings salvation. If the nativity proclaims that God sent His Son to be with us, it likewise proclaims that this Jesus is the only Son of God, the only revelation of God, and thus the only hope we have—the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6). And yet, we continue to search, to question, to delay, to mourn, to hesitate, to trade as if there were no salvation, no wisdom, no gifts, and no Saviour. The gospel is a glad epiphany! One of the greatest gifts of Advent and Christmas is the freedom to rejoice in this glad epiphany! Evermore and evermore.

To return to our opening poem *Gaudete: Ezechielis porta Clausa pertransitur, Unde lux est orta Salus invenitur. Ergo nostra cantio Psallat iam in lustro; Benedicat Domino: Salus Regi nostro. The closed gate of Ezekiel Is passed through, Whence the light is risen; Salvation has been found. Therefore, let our preaching Now sing in brightness Let it bless the Lord: Greeting to our King.*