

3d SUNDAY OF ADVENT – C (December 13, 2009)  
Fr. Jerry Kopacek

Our Advent observance now begins to shift focus as we come to the third Sunday of this holy season; that shift is visibly represented by our lighting of the one and only pink candle in our Advent wreath. We have thus far remembered that Jesus will come again in the fullness of his glory as divine king and judge. Now our attention begins to turn to his first coming and our preparations to celebrate his birth at Bethlehem. Christmas, in other words, draws ever nearer (less than two weeks away); and given what we experienced this past week, I think it is safe to say that we will indeed have a white Christmas...

Christmas is certainly an occasion of great joy (“Joy to the World”) is one of the great songs of the season), and our readings today set the stage for this spirit of joy. It seems that neither the prophet Zephaniah nor St. Paul could contain their own joy as they urged us to ‘shout for joy’ and ‘rejoice in the Lord always.’ The Church gives us these readings at this time to remind us that we should always have and live this joy, but even more so as Jesus birthday approaches.

So what is this joy to which we are called? You might think of words like happiness, pleasure, contentment, delight—ideas that have some relation to joy but do not fully capture it. Take pleasure, for example—an enjoyable feeling we get when we experience something through our senses. Coming into a warm house after shoveling the sidewalk in the bitter cold feels so good, and having a piece of your favorite Christmas candy tastes so good. But those pleasures, enjoyable as they are, don’t last long—they certainly cannot be the kind of joy our inspired writers mention. Even worse: if we pursue those pleasures to excess, they will become distinctly unpleasant. If you get too close to the fireplace in order to warm up, you will get burned. And if you have too many pieces of that delicious candy, you’ll get a bellyache and may have to get the next bigger size of pants...

So joy is more than the pleasures we experience; it can include those pleasures, but it isn’t limited to them. How about joy as happiness, or a sense of peace and contentment? You finally finish that homework assignment, you get a clean bill of health from your doctor, you get that promotion and that raise at work you have been striving for. You are happy about those results, and well you should be. But that kind of happiness can be fleeting as well: you get an even tougher assignment from your teacher the next day, you or a loved one later learns of a life-threatening illness, your job is eliminated after all because of downsizing. Distinctly unhappy situations, to be sure. And so the joy to which Zephaniah and Paul call us has to be based on something more than fortunate circumstances outside of ourselves that can change at the drop of a hat.

In its deepest, truest and most long-lasting sense, joy is a spiritual reality—it comes from God and is based on God. Joy has been described as ‘the echo of God’s life in us’ and ‘the infallible sign of the presence of God’. True joy is the delightful and certain knowledge that there is indeed a God who is no mere abstract philosophical concept, but is rather a Trinity of Persons who created us, who loves us with a passion and who thirsts for us, and who sent Jesus to be the truth and the way to eternal life for us. We will know that joy in its fullness only in heaven, but God in his goodness gives us little glimpses, the occasional foretaste of that heavenly joy here in this earthly life of ours. And he does so at least in part to whet our appetite, as it were, so as to increase our longing for heaven and eternal union with him.

One of the ways God gives us this foretaste of eternal joy is through our experience of beauty. Have you ever had the experience of seeing or hearing something that was so beautiful that it stopped you in your tracks, it took your breath away, and filled you with amazement...such that the only word that could come to your mind was an awe-filled ‘wow!’? That’s not just a hypothetical question, for that kind of beauty is real; in fact, it surrounds us. How many of you have ever seen a sunrise or a sunset whose brilliant colors, matched and combined to utter perfection, almost forced you to stand still and soak it in?

Or who has seen places like the Grand Canyon or the mountains? I was able to see Pike's Peak in Colorado in October (I was there for a wedding)—it gave the words 'for purple mountain majesties' in "America the Beautiful" a whole new meaning for me. It was majestic indeed, as is everything that God has created.

Or how about the beauty of human creation—gothic cathedrals, or sculpture like Michaelangelo's Pieta—a miracle of art showing Mary holding her dead Son, all of which is carved from a huge piece of rock. And then there is music, something very close to my heart. Yes, I still like the Beatles and other popular groups (I know I'm dating myself here), but there is other music that is so beautiful, so magical and (dare I say) other-worldly that it can bring tears to my eyes whenever I listen to it. The beauty of music can capture the heart and the soul and fill them with joy like few other things can. You are cordially invited to our Advent Lessons and Carols program (tomorrow) /this afternoon at 2:00 where you can hear music of genuine spiritual beauty and power.

And we dare not forget the beauty and joy we find in our human relationships—in one's spouse, child, parent, friend and so many others. I'm not talking just about physical beauty (the focus of the glamour magazines). Face it: that kind of beauty does not last; the aging process is relentless and gets us all—no matter how we may try to hide it! No, I speak of the inner beauty of love that is based on commitment and fidelity and sacrifice. I recently read about a woman whose 80-year-old father was taking care of his invalid and very aging and ailing wife. The daughter was with her father one day in the nursing home. He took his wife's face in his hands, looked at her for a long time and exclaimed to his daughter "Isn't she beautiful!"

That's the language of love--selfless love. Genuine beauty in whatever form draws us out of ourselves; it leaves us amazed and in awe—like that 80-year-old man still in awe of the beauty of his invalid and dying wife. That kind of beauty reminds us that there is more to this life and world—infinity more—than oneself. Fr. Thomas Dubay, a contemporary spiritual writer (and a very good one at that) says that the 'experience of great beauty readily evokes a nameless yearning for something more than earth can offer.' Ultimately, all beauty finds its source and origin in God, and is designed to draw us back to God. And so the joy we experience in beauty is ultimately grounded in God as well. Bishop Fulton Sheen referred to the joys we experience in this life—things like friendship, marriage, the glory of nature and of the arts—as gifts from God who 'dropped them on the roadway of life to remind you that if these are so beautiful, then what must be Beauty!' (with a capital B).

And so: take time to look for beauty; it's all around you. Slow down a bit. That's a challenge of course, especially in this busy season, but just do it. Slow down a bit, and rediscover your capacity to be captured by that which leaves you in awe and wonder. Then remember with joy that God made that beauty—he made it just for you, just for us, for our delight in order to draw us to himself (or to draw us back to himself). And Jesus is the way we come to God eternally, he whose birth we anticipate with increasing joy as Advent proceeds to Christmas. This is true joy that goes way beyond pleasure, beyond happiness, beyond contentment—a joy that can exist even in the midst of struggle or sorrow. "Rejoice in the Lord always; I say it again, rejoice!" Seeing the beauty that surrounds us and remembering the ultimate beauty of God and of his desire for our eternal joy through his Son Jesus will help us do just that.