

I don't think that there can be any doubt about the theme of this Eucharist! It has been there from the beginning with the lighting of the candles on the Advent Wreath: the candles of HOPE, PEACE and **JOY**. Then the following prayer asks for the "**fullness of joy**" in the midst of those events that have brought us sorrow and discouragement. How appropriate after all that has happened in this pandemic year! Then the Introit Sentence continues the theme: **Rejoice** in the Lord alway and again I say, **rejoice**. The hymn for the Introit then moves the focus on to the source of this joy: the message of John the Baptist that we heard in the gospel this morning.

John the Baptist had a central role to play to play in the coming of the Saviour. His role, as today's Gospel puts it, was to be a witness, to bear witness to the Light, that all through him might believe. He made it very clear that he was not the light. The light in question was Jesus.

John was a courageous and effective witness. He was a man of principle with a strong personality. He didn't go in for a life of comfort. He lived in the desert not in a palace. When his task was done, he moved aside and made way for Jesus.

Can we seriously hope to be always joyful? Certainly not in the sense of having one long celebration. I believe that at some time in every person's life there will be times of sadness. More than one person here today, or reading this sermon at home, will be asking : "What reason do I have for joy?"

If that is your question, then let me speak very personally to you. No matter what hurt you are experiencing today, whether it be loneliness, sadness, disappointment, bereavement, or some other form of suffering, there is still something to be joyful about.

At the first Christmas Jesus entered into our human life, he did so in the same way as we did: as a baby born of a human mother. He shared all the same experiences that we experienced in our own lives. He experienced life's joys and sorrows as we all do. The joy of the wedding at Cana of Galilee, but the grief at the death of his friend Lazarus when he shed tears. On the cross Jesus experienced the most terrible injustice and agonised suffering. The crib at Bethlehem and the cross at Calvary both tell us that God cares. God loves you and whatever problems you face in this life, God shares them with you.

Whatever we face in this life Jesus is never far from us. We can always link up with him through our prayer life. Short “arrow” prayers are often the best – such as “Jesus help me.” or “My Lord and my God.” Jesus is also with us through the words of the Bible, either read here or elsewhere in a Church, or in a quiet place at home or elsewhere. He is also with us in the sacraments, especially the one we are celebrating now: the Holy Eucharist. “This is my body” – “This is my blood” are his words.

Jesus is also with us when we reach out to help someone in any kind of need. One day we may hear him say: “Inasmuch as you have done it – or failed to do it – to one of the least of these my brothers or sisters, you did it – or failed to do it - to me.”

So we rejoice because Jesus entered into our human life long before we were born and that he is still always with us.

One future event lies ahead for each one of us, and that is death. If this were simply like the snuffing out of a candle, we would have little reason for joy. But death is infinitely more. Death is the great transformation: the passage from this life to life eternal, where there will be no limitations, no suffering, where God will wipe away all tears from our eyes. Naturally, we are saddened by the parting from loved ones that death entails, but we can rejoice to know that when we come to walk that last stretch of life’s way, Jesus will be with us.

Do we have reason for joy? I certainly believe so. We rejoice to know that God acted in the past to come among us in human form as Jesus, the Messiah. That he lived among us and taught us how to live. That he died on the cross of Calvary and overcame death through his resurrection. That following the Last Supper he left the apostles with this promise:

Let not your hearts be troubled;
believe in God, believe also in me.
In my Father’s house are many rooms;
if it were not so, would I have told you,
that I go to prepare a place for you?
And when I go and prepare a place for you,
I will come again and will take you to myself,
that where I am you may be also. John 14:1-3