

December 15, 2024 – Revd Wim Kuiper (Advent 3)
Anglican Church Arnhem & Nijmegen

Readings: Phil 4.4-7, Luke 3. 7-18

This Sunday is traditionally called Gaudete Sunday, the Latin word for rejoice. We have just crossed the middle of the season of Advent, still waiting in these coming two weeks for celebrating once again Christ's birth. Weeks that are made up of the shortest, the darkest days of the year. But just before we plunge into them, we are now called to rejoice. To allow ourselves to have this sense of joy deep down, despite everything that is perhaps not so joyful in our own lives, and certainly not in the world at large. For us Christians, there is not only a peace that passes all understanding, as St Paul calls it, but also a hope that passes all understanding of which we were reminded last Sunday. And on this third Sunday of Advent we even dare to propose the possibility of a joy that passes all, I would say regular human understanding.

So, what do you make of joy? Is it an emotion you experience quite often, or not so much? Is it an emotion you are longing for, but find difficult to reach? How do you hear these words of St Paul to the Philippians on this very day: 'Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: rejoice!' (Phil 4.4.) Rejoice in the Lord always? Can you imagine having a poster with this sentence, hanging at one of your walls. Or wearing it on a T-shirt? I have to say, I would find that difficult. I have not much space to hang anything on my wall, as I am living in an attic. And, to be fair, I not so much in to wearing T-shirts at all, let alone T-shirts with a message on it that I want everyone to read. Difficult also for another reason. I know that there many people around me that have very good reasons for not feeling joyful. And at times I am one of them. And it does not feel appropriate and certainly not pastorally wise to give someone who is in the midst of some real and deep pain, the simple and straightforward advice to rejoice in the Lord always. Rather than saying this to others, we can still perhaps very gently try to remind ourselves of such words when we do not feel very joyous. Gently nudging us into another direction, without enforcing anything. Because for all of us it still good to be aware of the fact that there is a time for everything. A time to laugh as well as a time to weep. Moreover a time for tears of sorrow and for tears of joy, sometimes even strangely combined. Strong emotions need to be handled with gentleness. A important word that St Paul also mentions in this passage: 'Let your gentleness be evident to all.' Which naturally starts with being gentle to ourselves, especially when we are caught up in any kind of emotional turmoil and pain.

So, how to deal with these words about rejoicing always in a good and healthy way ? Let us continue to look for what St Paul has to say on it in this beautiful passage. He does not talk about always rejoicing in general, but about always rejoicing in the Lord. And he reminds us in this passage of that fundamental and indeed as such very joyful truth that, no matter what happens to us; 'the Lord is near'. When we allow this truth to sink in more deeply, our anxiousness, our fears and worries, may steadily become less and less. 'Don't be anxious about anything.' Are not fears and worries often hindering us to be joyful? And it becomes more and more kind of a second nature, whenever we are bowed down by whatever it may be, to turn to the Lord. As Paul continues to write: 'In every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.' 'With thanksgiving'; these two extra words are very important here. They remind us of all the blessings that we still continue to receive out of God's hands, even at times of hardship. Or should we say, especially when the going gets tough.

And the passage ends with that beautiful sentence that we hear so often at the end of our services, just before the blessing, about that peace that passes all understanding. A peace that may experience in itself as a source of deep joy for us, as these two, peace and joy, are so closely connected to the experience of God's amazing grace in his Son Jesus Christ.

So, at this time of Advent we are called to joyfully anticipate our Lord's coming. To prepare ourselves by reflecting on what might hinder us in letting him take his full place in our hearts and minds, filling them with his peace and his joy. Such reflection might cause us to change things. To turn away from emotions and desires, ways of behaving that are not bringing us closer to Jesus and his kingdom. And, therefore,

also at this Gaudete Sunday, those stern words of John the Baptist have their place. In combination with St Paul's gentle advice, they may help us to further reflect on what to do and what not to do as we try to know Christ more clearly, to love him more dearly and to follow him more nearly.

In all of this, we may trust that Christ himself, God's Spirit resting upon us, will aid and guide us on the path towards this year's Christmas. Therefore I dare to say to myself and to all God's people gathered here today: rejoice in the Lord always, for the Lord is near! Amen