

Fourth Sunday of Lent: Goodbye Fear, Hello Joy

This Sunday is called Laetare Sunday. The word *Laetare* is Latin for joy. This celebration is actually different from the celebration we have we have the Third Sunday of Advent. That is Gaudete Sunday. *Gaudete* means rejoice, prepare to rejoice in the glory of the Lord coming on Christmas. The word *Laetare* that we use for this Sunday refers to the type of joy that is light hearted. Think of floating for joy. Think of the feeling you experienced when you first held your first child. You were floating for joy. This floating with the joy of the Lord is in stark contrast to the deep, heavy, grief we feel at on Good Friday. When the disciples learned that Jesus had risen from the dead, they were so full of joy that they proclaimed Alleluia in such a way that they were almost hyperventilating.

This Sunday we are reminded of how much we are loved. The people of the first reading were suffering. They had been brought into exile by the Babylonians. Their Temple had been wrecked. Their palaces burned. They brought all this on themselves. The reading details how they committed one abomination after another. The psalms tell us that they even committed child sacrifice. God punished the people, or allowed the Babylonians to punish them. In exile in Babylon, the Jews were completely helpless. They had no army. They had no political clout. But what they did have was their determination to return to follow God. They became adamant in the practice of their faith. They formed a way of life, a system where they expressed their determination to live for God. And God had mercy on them. They were, after all, his people. He loved them. Before the exile as the Babylonians were gaining power, the prophet Jeremiah had said that although they would be taken into exile, after seventy years the people would be released. And they were. God did this through a pagan, Cyrus of Persia, who conquered the Babylonians and then sent the Hebrews back to their country to rebuild it and to rebuild their Temple. Imagine the joy, the light heartedness of the Jews as they left Babylon for Judea and Jerusalem.

In the second reading from the *Letter to the Ephesians*, we hear that by grace we have been saved. We did not earn salvation. God saved us because He loves us.

And this is the main teaching of that Gospel reading we have heard so often. God so loved the world that he sent his only Son. Jesus did not come to condemn us. He came to save us.

Jesus is the judge of the living and the dead. Those who are determined to reject His Life will suffer the most terrible consequence, loss of union with God. That is hell. All the pictures of the tortures of hell like the lower part of Michelangelo's Last Judgement, all the scenes of hell depicted by Dante in the Inferno, and by so many others are trivial next to the loss of union with God. Jesus came to restore our union with God. He called us to walk in the light, His light. Light-hearted Sunday is the Sunday that emphasizes the joy we have when we walk in the Light of the Lord.

We really need the reminder that we live in the joy of the Lord. This has been a

heavy year. There are wars throughout the world, mostly notably in Ukraine and Israel/Gaza. There are continual concerns on how to treat immigrants to our country with dignity while at the same time upholding our laws. And to make matters worse, this is a presidential election year. That would make any year difficult. Yet, through it all we still have the joy that the Lord sees, the Lord knows and the Lord heals.

I like to listen to contemporary Christian music. I notice that so many of the songs speak about defeating fear. "We are no longer slaves to fear," Bethel music proclaims. "Fear you don't own me" Francesca Battistelli adds in the Breakup Song. "Fear Not," says Christine de Marco, and "Not today, fear," Hillsong United proclaims. Zach Williams really nails it when he sings, "Fear is a liar". Fear tells us that we are not good enough. This is the negativity fueled fear which the devil uses to incapacitate us. We do not need this type of fear. Our God loves us as a people and as individuals. This is our joy. "God did not give us a spirit of fear, but a spirit of power, and love and self control." *2 Timothy 1:7.*

But how about "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom," that *Psalms 9* proclaims? The type of fear this refers to is the action that leads us to reverence God. This is not an incapacitating fear. When we reverence God, we are freed to be all that we can be. St. Irenaeus of Lyon, an early doctor of the church, is credited as writing "The Glory of God is man fully alive." Human beings are the summit of God's creation. When we reverence the Lord with all that we are, when the fear of the Lord becomes the core of our lives, then we become all God has created us to be. We are fully alive because we are not just physical. We are physical and spiritual. Again, St. Irenaeus, "The Glory of God is man fully alive."

And we are loved. We are loved by God. The love of God is deeper than the love a husband and wife have for each other. The love of God is stronger than the love parents have for their children. The love of God is so powerful that it leads us to conquer anything that is attacking us, outside of us, among us, or within us.

As we come to a deeper understanding of how much God loves us, we experience joy. In fact, we are floating with the joy of the Lord. *Laetare*. For God so loved the world that he sent his only Son. He sent him for all of us, and he sent him for each of us. We are loved. *Laetare*. Float with joy. Be lighthearted and know your God.