

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time: On Being a Joyful Christian

I want to begin today by telling you a story about two young fellows from New Jersey, Vinnie and Rocco. On a rainy night they were in Manhattan driving on the Henry Hudson Highway, on Manhattan's West Side. Their car suddenly spun out of control, and they ended up visiting Henry at the bottom of the Hudson. The next thing they knew they were standing before the Pearly Gates where a big man with a short beard and a large set of keys was staring at them.

"I've got this," Vinne said to Rocco.

Then he said, "Yo, Pete, it's Vinnie and Rocco from Joisey."

St. Peter took one look at them and said, "I don't think so."

"Hey" said Vinnie, "there are a lot of good people in Joisey."

St. Peter said, "I'm sure you are right, but I don't know if you are part of them."

Rocco protested, "ask the boss."

So St. Peter went into Jesus' office and told him that there were too greasy looking guys from New Jersey trying to get in. Jesus said, "Good people come from New Jersey, Peter. Give them another look. Maybe if you knew them better you'll want to open up the Pearly Gates."

Peter went down, took a look and then called Jesus on the emergency phone. "Lord, we have a problem," he said, "they are gone."

Jesus said, "The guys from New Jersey. Where could they have gone?"

"No," said St. Peter, "not them, the Pearly Gates are gone."

I can get away with that joke because I'm one of those greasy looking guys from the Northeast. In fact, a number of years ago I got a haircut in New Jersey. The barber asked if I wanted a part or if I wanted my hair combed back. Oh well, at least I fit in.

There is nothing wrong with an occasional laugh in church or at ourselves. There are some people who do not agree with this. We all know many Catholics who are so sullen that you wonder why they would want to be Catholic if they could not be joyful.

It is true that it is a blessing in our faith that priests are not constrained in their preaching by concerns of job security. We are not afraid to proclaim that which might not be popular. However, it appears to me that preaching about negative things, the

bad news, has become more prevalent than preaching about the positive, the good news. We priests have plenty of ammunition to be negative. I have friends in other parishes who tell me that all they hear are negative sermons. They often leave Mass feeling down about themselves and about society. For them Christianity is not joyful, but a somber burden inflicted upon them. Jesus Christ did not come to berate us. He came to give us rest. When we look at the New Testament, the Christian scriptures, when we study the lives of the saints, the Good News is always joyful.

Consider today's readings. The Gospel tells us to be united to the Lord, to turn our burdens over to him and to allow him to refresh us. The reading says that our souls will find rest for his yoke is easy and his burden is light. Jesus says, "Give me all your problems and all your concerns, your many difficulties and trust me." We need to turn everything over to the Lord: our feelings of being overwhelmed with financial burdens, the down times in our relationships, the boring aspects of our jobs, our continual concern for our children, our concern for our parents or our children or our own health. We need to turn it all over to the Lord and be at peace. We need to have faith that no matter what happens, if we have union with the Lord, as Julian of Norwich, that mystic of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century wrote, *"All shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well."*

The first reading, from the prophet Zechariah, tells us to rejoice because the Savior has come. God is not far away from us. He is right here, in our hearts.

The saints, even the martyrs, especially the martyrs, were people of joy. It is said that the martyrs marched into the Coliseum singing. No matter what happened to them, they died at peace. St. Ignatius of Antioch, who lived from 32 to 120, was the bishop of what was at that time the second largest city in the Roman Empire. He was honored and respected. He wrote to the various Christian communities to be strong and courageous in the faith. When Ignatius was quite elderly, he was arrested and put to the test. Either offer incense to the Emperor and deny Christ, or be killed. He would not turn from the Lord. Ignatius was found guilty of being a Christian, and sentenced to be killed by the wild animals in the Colosseum in Rome. Rome was far away from Antioch, so it would be a long trip of two to three years for the elderly Ignatius and the soldiers guarding him. There were many Christians who wanted to save him. The Roman soldiers could easily be bribed to release him. A judge could be bought to overturn the verdict. But Ignatius wrote to those well meaning Christians and told them not to interfere. He valued it a gift to be allowed to suffer for being a Christian. He pleaded with them to allow him to die in joy.

We believe that God became one of us to join us in our turmoil so he could lead us to the joy of his peace.

"But, Father," you might say. "You have no idea of the grief I have. A loved one has died recently. Am I not to grieve, not to cry?" No, grieve, cry. That is a sign of the love you have. No one cries over the death of someone they did not love. But remember, in your grief, your inner turmoil, even with that brick of sorrow you feel in

your stomach, remember that the life of your loved one is transformed, not ended. Mourn missing him or her here, but know that your loved one is in the peace and love of Jesus Christ. Even in sorrow we Christians have fundamental joy. The Lord says, "Come to me all you who are weary with life, and I will give you rest."

Yes, we commemorate the Passion of the Lord solemnly during Lent. But the tears of Good Friday magnify the joy of Easter Sunday.

We are the Easter people, filled with the joy of the Risen Lord. Death has been defeated by eternal life. We should not be so somber, so serious, so negative, so out and out gloomy. Maybe some of us, beginning with priests, need this reminder: if your heart is filled with the joy of the Lord, kindly tell it to inform your face.

Recently, I spoke to a young man who told me that he had stopped worshipping because his life was not unfolding as he had planned. He did something that many people do with little repercussion. Only, in his case, he was caught and his whole life was changed. "Why did God let this happen?" he protested. In his anger he stopped praying. I asked him a simple question, "When were you happier, when you had God in your heart or when you went your own way?" He thought for a while, and then said something to me that I have heard many of our young people say, "Father, I want to be who I was, not who I am becoming. I want to be happy again."

The presence of the Lord brings joy, peace and refreshment to the soul.