

The third Sunday of Advent is known as “Gaudete Sunday.”

In the readings, we hear about miracles associated with the Messianic age, its coming, and what we need to do to prepare.

We also learn about the doubts of John the Baptist, how he dealt with them, and the blessing that makes us even more fortunate than John was.

Why is the third Sunday of Advent known as Gaudete Sunday? Its name is taken from the entrance antiphon of the service, which is:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice. Indeed, the Lord is near.

This is a quotation from Philippians 4:4-5, and in Latin, the first word of the antiphon is Gaudete.

What significance does this have?

Advent is the season of preparing for the arrival of Jesus (both his first coming and his second coming), and by the third Sunday of Advent, we are nearly there.

So it is appropriate to rejoice as we see the goal of the season approaching: “The Lord is near”

So, the seasonal material and readings today are full of joy, especially the Entrance Antiphon, and the First Reading from Isaiah.

“Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I say, rejoice!” is the cry of the Entrance Antiphon. Why? Because “the Lord is near”.

In the First Reading the prophet goes overboard with excitement and enthusiasm: Let the wilderness and dry lands exult, let the wasteland rejoice and bloom... let it rejoice and sing for joy.

And the reason for all this?

They shall see the glory of the Lord, the splendour of our God. And is it just a matter of being able to see him? No, for Look! your God is coming... He is coming to save you!

Salvation means bringing healing, wholeness and holiness as we become closely united to him. This healing, wholeness and holiness is graphically depicted: The eyes of the blind shall be opened, the ears of the deaf unsealed, then the lame shall leap like a deer and the tongues of the dumb sing for joy.

These words, as we will see later, will be applied explicitly to Jesus who brought this healing and wholeness into so many people's lives.

However, we should not confine this healing only to the physical. It will also include healing on the emotional, social and spiritual levels. We are not made whole until harmony and wellbeing flows through our whole self.

All this is closely linked to today's Gospel. We find ourselves, in Matthew's Gospel, at the mid-point in Jesus' ministry. John the Baptist had already been arrested. He had accused King Herod of doing something immoral, namely, marrying his brother's wife while his brother was still living.

While in prison, John hears about Jesus and sends some of his disciples with a question: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Whether John really wanted to know or whether it was really for the benefit of his disciples is not clear. After all, John had already proclaimed Jesus at the River Jordan and said he was not worthy to unloose the thongs of Jesus' sandals. "The one who is to come" is, of course, the long-expected Messiah.

How does Jesus answer? As so often happens, he doesn't respond directly to the question but quotes the prophet Isaiah using the passage which is our First Reading for today. "Go back and tell John what you hear and see: the blind see again, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life and the Good News is preached to the poor."

This exactly describes what Jesus has been doing. It also conforms exactly to what Isaiah said about the time of the Messiah. Jesus in effect is saying "Yes, I am the one who is to come. I am the Messiah, the Christ, the Saviour King of Israel."

While the Gospel speaks of the Messiah already here, we at this very time are, in a sense, still waiting in anticipation. Jesus, of course, is already present and working through his Body, the Christian community, the Church. But he still has to come more fully into our own lives. Shortly Auden will be taking that first step as he is baptised and welcomed into our church family and as his parents and godparents speak for him and nurture him in as he grows in faith. We all need to "experience the joy of salvation" – that power of healing and wholeness which Jesus can bring into our lives. This is something each one of us has to do and what we as a community also have to do. As a community we have a wonderful opportunity to welcome and support Auden and his family.

John the Baptist is presented by Jesus as one of the greatest persons ever born. Yet he missed the privilege of being born into the age of Christ, a privilege that has been made available to us. We would do well to emulate John in preparing ourselves for Jesus to really become part of our lives.

John was strong. He was a man of integrity. He was not one of the rich and famous. He was no pop star – all sound and no substance. He would never have made a glamorous icon for Hello magazine. Yet many people went out to hear him, to be challenged by him, to have their lives radically changed by his words.

Actually, our Christian vocation is similar to his. We are called to prepare the way for Jesus to come into our own hearts but also to prepare other people's hearts so that they, too, may "experience the joy of salvation", that healing, wholeness and holiness we all long for and which alone gives real meaning to our lives. Today is the start of that journey for Auden.

Christmas is a time of gifts – both giving and receiving. Let us make sure that among the gifts we offer to others is some of the Christian joy which we ourselves have received.