

I know a lot of Catholics haven't read the Documents of Vatican II, because they think they'd be a dry, daunting read, but they're not; and especially not 'Gaudium et Spes.'

That Document deals with how the Church can make present the saving love of Jesus in the nitty-gritty realities of the modern world.

Its title is taken from the opening words of the Latin original: "[Gaudium et spes] – the joys and hopes – and the sorrows and anxieties of people today are also [those] of the disciples of Christ."

Vatican II: GS; 1

Advent is a season of 'gaudium et spes' – a time of hope and joy – because we look forward to Christmas so that we can once more celebrate the birth of the Saviour.

It's also a season of 'gaudium et spes' because the Church is looking forward with the eyes of faith to that Day when Jesus returns in glory at the end of time.

That Day when Jesus: "Will wipe every tear [from] our eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things [will be] gone forever." Apoc. 21: 4

All of today's readings reflect that 'gaudium et spes;' and yet, if we look at the contextual reality in which they were written, and lived out, it may well lead us to ask how they can be so full of hope.

Baruch has had the traumatic experience of living through the Babylonians razing Jerusalem, and the Temple, to the ground.

Those who survived were taken into slavery in Babylon: and there, as the Psalm writer wrote: "Beside the rivers of Babylon, we sat and wept as we thought of Jerusalem." Ps. 137: 1

And yet, Baruch trusted that the Lord would one day: "Take off the garment of sorrow and affliction, and put on for ever the beauty of the glory from God [over His people.]" Bar. 5: 1

This He did when, 70 years later, Cyrus, King of Persia, defeated the Babylonians, and allowed God's people to go back to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple.

And the Psalm today is a hymn of thanks to God for that return from captivity: "When the Lord delivered us from bondage, it seemed like a dream. Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy." Ps. 126: 1 – 2

Yes, it was deliverance from bondage in an alien land: but the real deliverance; the deliverance from sin and death, which infects us like a cancer, wouldn't come to pass until Jesus dwelt among us: "Full of grace and truth." Jn. 1: 14

His cousin, John the Baptist, was to be the herald of Jesus the Saviour; to announce this 'gaudium et spes' that: "All people will see the salvation sent from God." Lk. 3: 6

There, at the Jordan River, John proclaimed that Jesus is: "The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Jn. 1: 29

Into this time, where Tiberius ruled as the god-Emperor in Rome, and the despotic Pilate and Herod ruled in his name in Israel: into this time of bondage – where 'gaudium et spes' seemed like a dream – Jesus set out on the road to the Cross to deliver us from enslavement to sin and death, which is far worse than any physical imprisonment.

Into this time stepped the Lamb who was slain, yet lives to reign as the King of Life.

And yet, as we reflect on the world as we know it, how can that be when there are: "Wars and revolutions, famines and earthquakes in various places and, because of the increaser of evil-doing, the love of many [grows] cold." Lk. 21: 9 and Mt. 24: & 12

It's very easy to become despondent, dejected, and for us to feel that, as Christians, we're an ignored, irrelevant minority.

If we'd been taken into slavery, like Baruch; if we were living in an occupied country, like John the Baptist, then we'd have something concrete to resist.

But, living in a comfortable, secular culture, it's as if we're facing an enemy that seems harmless; maybe doesn't even seem to exist.

So we quietly acquiesce, and become absorbed into the culture surrounding us, and that's just where the Devil can get a foot-hold.

As the singer/songwriter Bob Dylan so pithily sang: "Do you ever wonder just what God requires? You think He's just an errand boy to satisfy your wandering desires."

Bob Dylan: When You Gonna Wake Up

When we were Baptised, we were given the: "Boundless riches of Christ." Eph. 3: 8

Therefore, we're not to squander them by using the Lord, 'just as an errand boy to satisfy our wandering desires.'

As Catholics we're called to love the Lord with all our hearts, minds, souls, and bodies.

Paul, when he wrote to the Christians in Philippi, was living in the heart of a very secular culture – Rome – and because he'd spoken out boldly about Jesus, he was a prisoner for doing so.

He could have gone with the flow, watered down his witness to Jesus, made Him into one god among many of the Roman gods, and walked free; but he didn't.

To have done so would have been to betray the Lord he loved with all his heart and soul.

"When our hearts are wintry, grieving, or in pain, Christ's touch can call us back to life again."

JMC Crum: Now The Green Blade Riseth

This Christmas, may Jesus touch our wintry hearts, so that we too fall in love with Him all over again.

I'm sure we've all got our Christmas list prepared for Santa; and for many people that's enough to satisfy them – or so they think.

But, after they've opened their presents, had lunch, and then, having woken up after falling asleep in front of the TV listening to the Queen's Speech; then, in their heart of hearts, they know it doesn't satisfy their deepest desires.

So, this Christmas my prayer for you, for me, and especially those who have fallen away from the Church – fallen out of love with Jesus – is that which Paul prayed for his brothers and sisters in Christ in Philippi.

"I pray that your love will overflow more and more, and that you will keep on growing in knowledge and understanding. For I want you to understand what really matters, so that you may live pure and blameless lives until the day of Christ's return. May you always be filled with the fruit of your salvation – the righteous character produced in your life by Jesus Christ – for this will bring much glory and praise to God." Phil. 1: 9 – 11