

Joy is the dominant theme of our liturgy on this, the 3rd Sunday of Advent. In our opening prayer we ask the Father to help us experience the joys of the salvation Christ has won for us 'and to celebrate them always with solemn worship and glad rejoicing'. Our first reading from the prophet Isaiah invites nature to join in this rejoicing: (Is 35:1). The responsorial psalm proclaims the praises of God 'who gives sight to the blind, raises up those who are bowed down, protects the stranger and upholds the widow and orphan' (Psalm 145). And our gospel reading from Matthew invites us to embrace Jesus as our Saviour, the promised Messiah whose life and ministry manifest the saving power of God.

Too often in the past, Christianity has been presented as a rather grim and joyless affair, confronting us with a sense of guilt and failure. In an interview he gave a short time before his death, the well-known Radio and TV broadcaster, Terry Wogan, described his experience of growing up in Catholic Ireland in these words: 'There were hundreds of churches, all these missions breathing fire and brimstone, telling you how easy it was to sin, and how you'd be in hell.' Sadly, this perception of Catholic Ireland receives ample exposure in the media today. Without denying the truth of Terry Wogan's memories, they give us a distorted perception of the past based on the 'hell-fire sermons' of some zealous but misguided preachers.

Today's gospel reading begins with John the Baptist in prison because of his public condemnation of King Herod for divorcing his first wife and unlawfully marrying his sister-in-law, Herodias. Surprisingly, John seems to need reassurance about the Messianic identity of Jesus. When he heard about what Jesus was doing he was disturbed and confused, so he sent some of his disciples to ask Jesus if he was the promised Messiah 'or have we got to wait for someone else?' (Mt 11:3). The response of Jesus is to point to the incontestable evidence of his healing and life-giving ministry: 'Tell John what you hear and see' (Mt 11:4). His actions prove that he is the Messiah foretold by Isaiah, the one who embodies God's healing love rather than the fiery prophet of divine retribution that John may have expected. We trust that John was indeed reassured by what his disciples reported back to him and did not lose faith in Jesus – 'Happy is the man who does not lose faith in me' (Mt 11:6).

The reality of sin and failure is not heartbeat of the Christian story; it is merely the backdrop. The core of good news of Jesus Christ is the victorious love of God who forgives, heals and makes all things new. And the experience of this love is the source of our joy. But what is joy? We think of joy very much in association with youthfulness, freshness, innocence. And it is true that joy keeps us young. A joyful person seems always youthful. Like the kiss of the sun on a flower, or a smile lighting up a child's face, joy transforms. People who are joyful transform those around them. Joy is contagious. In the presence of joyful people, our hearts become lighter and the world around us seems so much brighter.

Christian joy must not be confused with the kind of superficial cheerfulness we often come across in our social gatherings. It is not the false hilarity of those who choose to ignore the reality of suffering in the world around them, or avoid pain in their own lives. In the words of John Catoir, 'Joy is not the absence of pain. It is the awareness of God's loving presence within you.' And this awareness is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Christian joy is quite compatible with sorrow and even with anger. As Christians we are called to share not only in the passion of Christ, but also in his passions – his joy and sorrow, his frustrations. These are the passions of those who are alive with the gospel, those who have come to know from personal experience that 'it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and in dying that we are born to eternal life' (Prayer of St Francis).

The joy of the gospel is a joy that is often found in the midst of pain and suffering. The most joyful people I have come across in my life as a missionary priest were those who had been profoundly touched by the pain of the world. I give just one example among many. Several years ago, an Irish Lay Missionary, Barbara McNulty, worked among the poor in Brazil. She later wrote a memorable account of her experience for an article in The Tablet, describing how she found joy in the heart of suffering. 'I worked for many years with the sick and the dying in a place where one would expect to find despair and depression; yet because of the warmth of the love all around me I found laughter and hope'. As disciples of Jesus, we are invited, like Barbara McNulty, to share the joy Jesus offers us, the joy we discover only when we reach out to others in love.