

2022-12-11 Fr. John's Homily for the 3rd Sunday of Advent

Rejoice

The Jesuit priest, John Hardon, was a very devout and holy man who worked very long and very hard on behalf of the kingdom. He was a prolific writer, and a great teacher. In his later years he taught classes at Assumption Grotto Church in Detroit to anybody who wanted to come and listen and learn. He influenced many students over the years and I was one of them. One thing he taught, which I shared with you recently, was about an addition to the 10 Commandments. He put it this way, "If there was an 11th commandment, it would have to be, **thou shalt not tempt.**" With the implication that for anybody who would tempt one of the little ones, *it would be better if a millstone be attached to their necks and that they be thrown into the depths of the sea.* Pretty serious stuff.

Well, having learned from a master, maybe I could now be so presumptuous to suggest a 12th commandment. But it's not a *thou shalt not*, it's a *thou shalt*. I give you this commandment: "**Thou Shalt REJOICE! Again, I say, Rejoice.**"

If you examine the sacred scriptures, you will hear in a number of different places, this idea of rejoicing as placed before the people, not so much as a suggestion, but as a commandment. Well at least a strong exhortation. Just like the one I just mentioned from St. Paul. "*Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice.*"

All the commandments are, in a sense, countercultural, or signs of contradiction. And by that I mean they stand in opposition to our fallen human nature. I don't know about you but I typically don't want to obey commands. I wanna do my own thing. And, frankly I don't feel like rejoicing much of the time. There is too much sadness and sorrow in the world, and even in my own life. So how can you command me to rejoice, or to be joyful?

In our two annual penitential seasons of Lent and Advent, the Church gives us two days, roughly at the halfway point, where we focus on rejoicing. We call them *Laetare* Sunday and *Gaudete* Sunday and we do a few small things that seem a little bit more festive. Like the color of the third candle or the vestments. From somber purple to a more festive rose.

And of course we are called upon to reflect upon this paradoxical idea of rejoicing in the face of sadness, sorrow, frustration, confusion, depression, despair, and any other negative words that might reflect what we feel in the depths of our souls.

Where can we go for an explanation of this rather unusual idea of rejoicing? Well, we don't have to look very far. As a matter of fact we are confronted by it every time we come into Church. The crucifix. The crucifixion of Jesus was unquestionably the saddest, most sorrowful, most frustrating, confusing, depressing and despairing event in history. Unquestionably a negative event in the eyes of the world. Anytime a person is executed, particularly if they are deemed innocent, well, that's sad. And yet, this was the will of God. Jesus embraced His cross and rejoiced in it. Why? How? Well, because of what it accomplished: Our salvation, and a reconciliation with God the Father after the sin of Adam.

This is, of course, the ultimate *sign of contradiction*. It's a scandal and an absurdity in the eyes of an unbelieving world. But for believers, the sad and bitter cross *can become* a cause for rejoicing. Because, *if we let it*, it can transform all of our sufferings into saving events. We are invited to "offer it up." We can do this every day at the beginning with our morning offering. The one I learned says, "Jesus, through the Immaculate Heart of Mary, I offer up my prayers, works, joys, *and sufferings* of this day, for all the intentions of your Sacred Heart, in union with the holy sacrifice of the Mass throughout the world, in reparation for my sins, for the intentions of all of our associates, and in particular for, well, fill in the blank. Your particular prayer for that day.

But one could wonder if there is a passage in scripture that might help convince us of this strange notion. A lot of biblical ideas look good on paper but whenever you experience them in life, well that's a different story. I don't know about you, but I don't like to suffer. Not in the least. And even though there are explanations, or rationales for all our sufferings, provided by the saints, well it still doesn't feel very good. And we want it to go away. ASAP. As soon as possible.

I would like to propose a short verse that re-introduced me to this idea many years ago as I entered into a period of time that the church would describe as *The Dark Night of the Soul*. Now, there's a scary term if I ever heard one. Thanks but no thanks, I don't want no dark night for my soul. But in any case I did have one once and in the midst of my despair I called out to the Lord, humbly, hopefully, asking for an explanation of what it was that I was going through.

It was one of those classic moments of putting your finger down on the passage that you needed to hear at that very moment. The words are from St. Peter in his first letter. Chapter 1. I read this passage by beginning with the last few words of the previous sentence, ".....over this you rejoice, but it goes on to say.....*though now, for a little while, if need be, you are made sorrowful by various trials, so that the temper of your faith, which is more precious than gold which is tried by fire, might result in praise, glory, and honor, when Jesus Christ is revealed.*"

So let's go back to the earlier verse to get a clue as to what there is to be rejoicing about in the midst of all these trials. Well, Peter says that "*we have been given a new birth, into a living a Hope, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. And into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade. This inheritance is kept for you in heaven, and you will be shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.*"

Well, those were indeed hope-filled words that sustained me during that period of time where I had to endure those trials. I told you before that those trials were meant as something like a spiritual *Boot Camp* for me because God had some leadership plans for my life. And so as unpleasant as it was, it had its good purpose.

Now the very last line of that passage talks about a coming salvation to be revealed in the last time. I'm of the opinion that we are in some very serious times right now that could be at least the foothills of the end times. Things certainly could get a lot worse. But can we say that the current sufferings are a dark night of the soul for the world? And that the world is made sorrowful by various sufferings for the same reasons an individual might have to endure these things? That is, for its salvation? It's all a very preposterous theory of course. But the *Cross* is preposterous. And we Christians are indeed called to be a very strange lot. A peculiar people. Signs of contradiction.

But in the end, I trust that these things that we believe and promote, will become very apparent to the rest of the non-believing world as *the scales fall from its eyes* and they are given a final opportunity to repent. Let's be ready for them. Rejoicing, at their return.

~Fr. John