

Rejoice in the Lord always

December 17, 2006

Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

There is a strange and perplexing contrast between the three readings in the Lectionary for this Sunday. In the Old Testament, in the Book of Zephaniah (3:14-20), we read *Sing aloud O daughter of Zion, Shout O Israel, The lord your God... will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival.* In his letter to the Philippians (4:4-7 (8-9), Paul exhorts his readers to *rejoice in the Lord always for the Lord is near at hand.* In an earlier time each celebration of the Mass began with an Introit, or opening act of worship, consisting of a psalm verse, or a short passage of Scripture proper to the day. The Introit for this day, the 3rd Sunday of Advent, was always Philippians, chapter 4, verse 4: *Rejoice in the Lord always.* It was sub-titled *Gaudete (GAU-DAY-TAY)* from the Latin for *rejoice*. The Sunday became known as **Gau-day-tay Sunday**. As a departure from the somberness of violet, it became customary to light a rose candle in the Advent wreath, as we have done, to brighten our spirits as we await the coming of Christ.

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But, in the Gospel, on the other hand, we have this thunderous message of doom and repentance from John the Baptist. *Bear fruits that befit repentance* (Lk. 3:8) he preached. *Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees* v.9). He meant to awaken his audience out of their complacency and into a sense of urgency. When it came to one's relationship with God and neighbor, spiritual stupor was not enough. That is why John's first call was to stir up the people to repentance. Based on the opening phrase for the Collect for today, we might well call this *stir up Sunday*.

Unlike today, John's listeners knew what repentance meant. It meant a profound change with respect to what someone had his or her heart set upon. This change of heart issued in an outward and visible sign, demonstrating the newly embraced relationship with God and neighbor. John the Baptist's *main* purpose was to prepare the populace to receive the *mightier*

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One who would come with fire and the Spirit. He was not the architect of mass social and religious renewal. He did not engineer, he *excited*. He did not plan he *proclaimed*. He did not call the shots, he called forth. He did not arrange, he *announced*. He did not structure, he *stirred up*. He trumpeted to all, not just the children of Abraham, that God's great *second chance* was at hand, manifested in water baptism and through a decisive change of heart. John spoke to people, not social structures, because, in the end, it was people, with converted hearts, who could change, and only then did this change flow into the social structures.

So, having said all of that, what does this radical, wide-eyed prophet imply for us who are knee-deep in Advent? He signifies that if the approaching *new age* of God in Christ is to be born in us, the *old age* has to be reformed from the inside out. Forget about the Episcopal Church, or the Diocese of New Jersey, or

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the Parish and the Vestry. We are the ones, we *are* the ones who have to change. Where is this change to take place, and how can it be consistent with John the Baptist's call to change? I can think of a few areas as a place to start.

There are *money* matters. If John the Baptist came striding into our culture today, our mental fixation on money would surely top his *hit list* as a barrier to grace. Our obsession with money, where it is coming from, to whom it will go, how it will be saved, where it will be spent, in what amounts for what purposes, often rules our lives. Advent's call to renewal means refusing to let the obsession with money rule our lives.

Then there is *work*. Fixation with work has become normalized. Who wouldn't want a *workaholic* working for them? But, the reality in this compulsion is that work often becomes a fix. It energizes and breathes life into the worker, who, if not working feels

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depressed or let down. Compulsive work is a hard nut to crack because the behavior is often justified by the person's alleged need to get ahead and to be successful. Inevitably, however, work becomes the idol that demands worship and total obedience. In the process, the light of Christ grows dimmer and dimmer.

And there is *shopping*. If there is anything that takes away from the peace that should be growing in our hearts during Advent, it is the feverish running from store to store. The allure of the Malls, the mountains of, sometimes, beautiful catalogs, the attention from shop assistants seduce us into this destructive unreality. Can we respond to the call for repentance by reassessing our approach to money, work and shopping? Yes. Is this being simplistic? Perhaps, but there is an even more fundamental response to John's call, an example of which is found in the words of a prayer we use during Lent at Stations of the Cross: *Lord, make me realize that every time I wipe a dish,*

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pick up an object off the floor, assist a child in some small task, or give another preference in traffic or the store; each time I feed the hungry, clothe the naked, teach the ignorant, or lend my hand in any way, the kindness I extend to them, I really give to you.

This is repentance, this is surrender. As John said of Christ, *He who is mightier than I is coming* (v. 16a). When people can perceive quite clearly that all of us preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus our Lord, then they will forget about the messenger and will pay attention to the message. God's peace ultimately comes by *being*, not *having*. That is the heart of Advent and the approaching promise of the Incarnation, when we can all share in that gladness Zephaniah wrote about with rejoicing and *loud singing as on a day of festival*.

AMEN.