



Week 3: Gaudete Sunday

'The Lord, your God, is in your midst' (Zeph 3:17), a God who will rejoice over you with gladness and renew you in his love. So sings Zephaniah in the first reading of this Third Sunday of Advent, traditionally known as Gaudete (rejoice) Sunday because the entrance antiphon is taken from today's letter to the Philippians: '*Gaudete in Domino semper*' ('Rejoice in the Lord always' Ph 4:4). Like Lent, Advent is a penitential season, so the priest normally wears purple vestments; but on Gaudete Sunday, having passed the midpoint of Advent, the mood lightens a little and the priest wears rose vestments. The change in color provides us with encouragement to continue our spiritual preparation for Christmas.

Our joy in the knowledge that God draws near echoes through the readings. We can experience the nearness of God today through the nearness of others, through the beauty of the created world, through prayer and reflection, through the comfort of silence, and through celebration and rejoicing. In fact anything – any person, place, thing, event, sight, sound, taste, touch, smell – can help us to experience the love of God. To appreciate anything in its depth is to see it as revelatory of God, a God whose love spans the full vocal range from 'loud singing' to silence. The Hebrew phrase in Zephaniah's song usually translated as 'renew you', literally means 'he will be silent' (Zeph 3:17); he will be silent in his love.

There are many ways to cultivate eyes to see. As Advent is a penitential season, prayer and fasting come to mind. Another is through the wonder of a child; what better witnesses to the joy of Christmas than children? Visiting a crib with children can help us to see again, with new eyes, the nearness of God. What they notice, the questions they ask and how they react to the empty manger or the animals sharing living space with humans can be revelatory.

Again, although mindful of the commercialisation of Christmas and the excessive emphasis on material gifts, the frank enjoyment of the presents that children receive shows a genuine, uncomplicated love. Material things can cloud the nearness of God

but, at the same time, the childlike love which delights in presents can often be a warm, infectious reminder of the love of God. We can teach our children in this regard but we can learn from them too.

Recognising God's presence is a first step. When the beauty of the world around us, the kindness of a friend or the joy of a child reveals to us the presence of God, we are challenged to respond. Our response, whether of joy or uncertainty, prompts in us the question the crowd asks of John: 'What then should we do?' (Lk 3: 10). John's response is unequivocal and will be echoed by Jesus right through his life and ministry: be generous and honest, be just and fair, be conscious of who you are and of your responsibilities and carry them out with compassion, so that you might grow into the person you were made to be.

God comes to us out of love, whether we are ready or not. Advent centres on this expectation and on preparing ourselves for the coming of the Christ child – the outstretched arms from the manger inviting us into the love of God. [569]