

Third Sunday of Advent – Rev'd Tim Clifford Hill

'Rejoice in the Lord always.' The first words of our first reading today. Fitting words for today, the third Sunday of Advent.

The third Sunday of Advent is also called 'Gaudete' Sunday. 'Gaudete' being the Latin word for 'Rejoice.'

In some churches the colour pink (traditionally called 'Rose') is used on the altar and clergy vestments.

And on Gaudete Sunday we can start to rejoice because Christmas is drawing closer.

Our Gospel passage today has a very different beginning. 'You brood of vipers!' Said John the Baptist to the crowds.

'What is this all about?' You may be wondering.

I'm sure you all know that John the Baptist lived in the desert. At that time the desert was covered with pockets of very dry wood on the ground. Sometimes the sun and ground were so hot that they set the pieces of wood alight and out of the wood came nesting Vipers - snakes - scurrying in terror from the menacing flames. It was to these vipers that John likened the crowd.

The Jews at the time thought that they were God's favoured nation forever. But when God, in Jesus, came to earth and preached among them, the Jewish Teachers did not believe. When the light of the world came among them with the fire of God's love, some of them turned their backs and scurried away from the fire of love.

John goes on to tell the crowd about the coming of the Messiah, the coming of God's Kingdom, and teaches them about what we might now call 'Christian morals,' of caring for people and sharing with people. Morals and values that are at the forefront of most people's minds - whatever their faith - at this time of year, as we draw closer to Christmas.

This week has been 'school carol service week' here at St. Nic's. We've welcomed pupils, parents and staff from Longacre, Duke of Kent and Acorn Nursery Schools for their carol services and nativity play. I had my first 'proud

parent at a Nativity' moment this year, when my son, Henry, was cast as 'Shepherd Number 2.'

I was asked to preach at one of those carol services, and in my sermon, I spoke about the meaning of Christmas for me. A fitting topic for this Gaudete Sunday too, as we rejoice that Christmas is drawing closer.

For me, the meaning of Christmas is summed up in the first phrase of a hymn - 'come thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free.' It's the second half of that phrase, 'born to set thy people free,' that for me explains the meaning of Christmas.

God comes to us in the form of a baby and that baby, Jesus, died on the cross and was resurrected. It is that death and resurrection which sets us free. Free from the bondage of sin. Forgiven forever.

The second century theologian ,Saint Irenaeus, said that 'the glory of God is a human being fully alive,' and it is because of Good Friday and Easter that we are forgiven and able to live and love. To live in God's created world and to be loved by God. And to give that love back to God by radiating God's love to everyone we come into contact with. Not only at Christmas but whenever we can.

But we can't have the freedom that comes with Easter without the joy - the 'Gaudete' - of Christmas. Without remembering and giving thanks, every year, that God came to earth in the form of a baby. Entering into the reality of human life, with all its sorrows and with all its joys.

'Come thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free.' That, for me, is the meaning of Christmas.

As we approach the birth of the Christ Child, on this Gaudete Sunday, I wonder what the meaning of Christmas is for you?

Amen.