

3rd SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Year B

Throughout its history the Holy Land has been a tense place. Among the hardships faced by the Palestinian community today are losing access to olive groves and having movement restricted. People living in the Palestinian town of Bethlehem are hemmed in by a thirty foot high separation wall built around it and must regularly pass through checkpoints. All this is monitored by people from many countries working with the World Council of Churches in Palestine and Israel.

On Christmas Eve in 2010, one of these folk, a woman from Coventry in England named Ann Farr, joined Christmas celebrations in Nablus. This Palestinian city lies sixty kilometers north of Bethlehem. Ann reported that despite the troubles facing the people, Christmas 2010 was “very special”. She was struck by the joyful nature of the celebrations.

The Christmas festivities involved visits to the four churches of Nablus: Catholic, Melkite, Orthodox and Anglican. At the Melkite church the priest offered Arabic coffee to the visitors, including local police and scouts and Father Christmases of all shapes and sizes, as well as Ann and other visitors. Afterwards, everybody set off down the street, led by the priests and the town governor, and by young people with musical instruments and flares. The crowd included families, old and young people, Christians and Muslims. Muslims joined in to celebrate that both Christians and Muslims worship one God. At the Latin Catholic Church, the people quietened down in front of a cave-like crib while the priest delivered his Christmas message, and afterwards coffee and chocolates were served. At the Anglican church, in Ann’s words “ we guessed at the readings and recognized the familiar carols being sung with great gusto in Arabic by the congregation and joined in, in our own languages, when we could”. It’s a sad reflection of our time that there appears to be little of this spirit of joy in Bethlehem this year. With the recurring tension that has been generated in recent weeks it seems that as of last week the Christmas lights in Bethlehem and other places have been dimmed.

But on this “Gaudete” Sunday (“Rejoicing” Sunday) the Church reminds us of the call to rejoice. “Be happy at all times” says Paul in today’s second reading. We are called to have so much hope in our hearts and trust in God that we are able to do this in good and bad times. Paul urges us to nourish the spiritual dimension of our lives and to learn to be more sensitive to God’s presence among us.

The first reading and the psalm – which is taken from Mary’s Magnificat – prophesy that poor people and social outcasts have particular reason to be happy. In fact, God has taken an option for those who are poor: prisoners will be freed, those who are starving will be fed and the broken-hearted will be healed. The text from Isaiah is the one Jesus read out when he opened his public ministry, offering “good news to the poor” and proclaiming a time of grace or Jubilee. Mary too, in today’s psalm, places herself in the context of the new and just world that is dawning.

In the Gospel we sense a feeling of anticipation growing among the people. They were beginning to reform their lives, expecting that at any moment the Christ might be revealed to them. They believed that God was faithful, generous and close to them. They had every reason to rejoice.

Does this mean we should go about our daily lives with a constant smile on our face? Well, we could smile more often than we do. We could be more willing to focus on our blessings rather than our problems. As Advent progresses and Christmas draws near, we can have a heightened awareness of God’s presence among us and openness to being changed and blessed by it.

Advent is a time to prepare not only materially but also spiritually for the coming of the Lord. It is a time to step outside our busy lives, our tasks and appointments, and simply recognize God’s loving presence in the natural world. The tasks and

appointments will still be there and will have to be attended to. But even in our “busy-ness” let’s take time today to look up into the sky and be aware of breathing, taking in the fresh God-given air that keeps us alive. Let’s pay special attention to family and friends. And as we give thanks for God’s gifts to us, let’s ask ourselves how we can be of service to people who are sick or in trouble, or worried about facing Christmas on a low income. Can we give time to people who may be depressed or who do not have many friends ? As Christmas draws near, let us join Paul in glorifying God for sending Christ to walk alongside us on this earth. Let’s resolve that this year’s Christmas celebration will be a heartfelt and generous community celebration of divine grace.