

3rd SUNDAY OF ADVENT Year C

You are shuffling along to work. It's a dreary Monday morning and Friday is too far away even to think about it. Out of the drizzle she comes, and you can see from the spring in her step and the expression on her face that she is very happy. She appears lit from within and her face looks as if she has rented the sun. She beams joy.

Suddenly she embraces you and kisses you on both cheeks, just for good measure. After you have disentangled yourself you say "What have you got to smile about ? It's a rotten day, half the world is hungry and the other half is at war, and you're beaming. How come ?" She looks puzzled for a moment, gives you a large wink, and goes off with her joy intact. You shuffle on, wondering.

There's nothing else quite so puzzling as someone else's joy when we are feeling down. Or someone else's sadness while we are on top of the world. The ultimate puzzle is when people are joyful in the midst of suffering and desolation, when people dance among the ruins that surround them, refusing to be locked into an environment of despair. Like Zephaniah the prophet – calling through the slums of a defeated Jerusalem for a grand party to celebrate the real fortune of the people. Like St Paul – a prisoner in his cell awaiting his approaching death and writing letters to cheer other people up. Like John the Baptist – a wilderness voice in occupied territory announcing Good News to his own country people.

How come ?

Zephaniah, John the Baptist and Paul all shared one belief: that the Lord was very near. God's nearness didn't act as a threat to them, but funded them with a radical source of joy that no one could steal from them – not even the executioner. Their joy in the closeness of God gave an edge to their preaching exhorting others to make ready; it gave them a vision to see the far side of disaster; it moved them to draw others into that sense of joy. None of them kept that joy to themselves; each moved out hoping their inner joy would be catching.

The picture of John the Baptist as a man who moves in deep joy is not one you hear about very often. John is usually portrayed as a lonesome figure, with a weird wardrobe and a weirder diet, who rants and raves at anyone with ears. But in fact John was a magnetic character who intrigued people to seek him out and also follow him. People don't

journey into the wilderness just to get insulted; people don't become disciples for the wardrobe and the diet. In the person of John people could catch something of God's way.

Which is why people ask him: "What must we do, then?" And John's answer is to challenge people's generosity and sense of fairness so that others may have reason to rejoice. Give bread to the hungry and clothes to those who have none. When the tax collectors ask what to do, John tells them to keep to the going rate without over-taxing people in order to cream off the extra arithmetic for themselves. People are burdened enough. Be just. To the soldiers who accompany tax collectors to protect them and give some muscle to their requests, John tells these heavies not to use their position as a weapon for their own reward. Be content with your pay and stop stealing from the poor and the weak. They extort from others making them poorer; John urges them to be happy in doing what is just.

John makes such a deep impression on people that word goes around that he might be the Christ. Again, that expectancy is a measure of John's effect on people. John doesn't claim to know *who* the Messiah is; all he knows is that *he* is not. That role is for someone else, someone greater and more powerful than John.

John the Baptist and Paul shared a radical sense of God's nearness. Both were executed. The joy of God's closeness was a power that carried them through times of horror, so neither had to deny the difficulty of their experience. Both men faced an opposition determined to destroy them; both had a belief that encouraged them beyond the reality of imprisonment and execution.

Do you remember Van Nguyen, the young Australian who was apprehended some years ago (in Singapore I think) and who clearly underwent a conversion experience while in jail awaiting execution for drug-smuggling? He promised his brother that he would dance on his way to the gallows. My understanding is that he did just that.

We all need a power that carries us through difficult times, that prods us on when we face the reality of our weakness and limitation. To believe in the abiding presence of a God who cares gives us a deep sense of joy in the midst of our own stops and starts. That presence always challenges our generosity and calls on our sense of justice. It keeps us on our toes. It enables us to continue living even when the calendar is crowded with dreary Mondays.

Who knows ? It might even put a spring into our Advent shuffle !