

## Tablet Article - December 11, 2005

Third Week of Advent, Year B

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"I rejoice heartily in the Lord, in my God is the joy of my soul." The third Sunday of Advent, traditionally called Gaudete Sunday, is filled with the notion of the Church's joyful expectation of the coming of the Messiah. The liturgical color for the day changes from purple to rose. It suggests the sun about to rise through the dark clouds of morning.

Joy is sometimes confused with happiness. The former is deep-seated and enduring, while the latter passes away quickly. Joy comes from within. It does not result from anything material.

True joy comes from the depths of our spirit where the Spirit of God dwells. The first reading from the Book of Isaiah speaks of the very presence of God as a Spirit resting upon and anointing and sending forth the one he has chosen. The presence of that Spirit is manifested in the one who brings glad tidings, proclaims liberty, releases from bondage, and announces favorable things from the Lord. The Spirit, the source of all life, of all that is good, will make "justice and praise spring up before all the nations."

Even amidst the many trials that St. Paul endured, he writes to the Thessalonians that they should rejoice always, to pray without ceasing, and not to quench the Spirit. To stifle the Spirit is to eradicate joy from our lives. It is obvious that when one possesses and exudes the Spirit of God that person's life becomes different from all those around him who have not tasted and shared in the very breath of the Holy One.

In the Gospel of this Sunday John the Baptizer, "a man who was sent from God," testifies to the light. His sole mission was to make that light known to a people who 'dwelt in darkness and in the shadow of death'.

John reminds those around him that "there is one among you whom you do not recognize, the one who is coming after me." John's wisdom and his very discernment at the heart of that wisdom is to recognize and to point out the Messiah.

John indeed is the true prophet. He is the mouthpiece of God. He is the forespeaker of the Almighty. His presence in the New Testament, like that of Isaiah in the Old Testament, is to give hope and promise to a people whose vision is beclouded by the circumstances of their surroundings.

The Spirit of God that dwells in a prophet, especially in figures like Isaiah and John the Baptizer, help people to realize what they need and not what they want. There can be quite a difference between what people desire and what they must have to be saved. For many the process of coming to a real awareness of what one needs as opposed as to what one wants can be very difficult. We must seek that which gives us abiding joy, not passing happiness. When one accepts the Spirit of God, one can easily see how clear the choice is between the two. This 'discernment of spirit', as spoken of by so many spiritual writers, comes from the Latin word which means *to separate*. Essentially to know what is of God or not, or precisely to know what is of Jesus or not, is the heart of discernment. Joy manifests itself through this discerning spirit. Sadly, John reminded an undiscerning people, "There is one among you whom you do not recognize."

Paradoxically one can endure great suffering and still experience joy. A friend of mine many years back, enduring the rejection of others for his stance for justice, said to me, "I have never suffered so much in my life, but I have never experienced such joy." That's what happens when we prayerfully live in the presence of the One who breathes in us.

John, the herald of God's joy in this world, knew very well that as a prophet he would have to suffer. But he also knew that the presence of the power that lived in him through his life in the Spirit of God, would help him to endure and joyfully accept whatever was in store for him. His was not to question why, but only to say yes. His was a mission that would be completed by the presence of the Messiah. How well Paul can characterize this attitude when he simply says to the Thessalonians, "The One who calls you is faithful, and he will accomplish it."

Are our lives today characterized by joy? Do we realize that we who are anointed and consecrated by the Spirit of God share in the prophetic role of John the Baptizer, of Jesus Himself? Everyone has a mission, and through that mission we help to bring ourselves and each other to an awareness of who we are and what we truly need and not just want.