

REJOICE – THE LORD IS NEAR

I remember a teacher in a school telling a story about one particular student who was continually creating problems. Every year the teacher would send a report back to the student's parents: Johnny really needs to do better, he needs to make more of an effort, he needs to improve his attitude. And every year Johnny would come back and it would be the same old story all over again. At the end of one year the teacher decided to send back a different report. It said: despite continuing rough edges Johnny has shown signs this year of qualities within him that bode very well for the future. As he matures and recognises his own strengths, I am convinced he will make a significant contribution to the school. I feel he shows great potential for leadership and for growing into a fine young man. The following year for Johnny in school was a very different story. The transformation was incredible, what was once unruliness had now become a strength of character, a sense of pride in himself and an awareness of his own power to affect those around him for good. He went on to make that significant contribution.

It is amazing the difference our attitude makes, when our eyes are open to the good news that is already there waiting for us to see it. When we're able to look at ourselves and see our own potential, when we're able to look at our lives and the people in them and see all the good there is; when we're able to look around us and see, not just the problems, but also the possibilities. Rejoice, the Lord is near!

There's a simple rhyme which goes:

“Two men looked out through prison bars,
One saw mud, the other stars.”

What we choose to look at shapes our experience and also our life. There's a short Chinese poem that reminds us that each time brings its own gift if we are willing to accept it. This moment we are in now is full of possibility, beauty and the potential for joy.

“Ten thousand flowers in spring, the moon in autumn,
a cool breeze in summer, snow in winter.

If your mind isn't clouded by unnecessary things,
this is the best season of your life."

("The Best Season," Wu-Men 1183-1260)

There's a story told about a man who woke up in a Dublin hotel feeling very angry because the people at the desk were supposed to wake him up half an hour earlier, and they never did. To add insult to injury, room service delivered bacon and eggs, when he had ordered hard boiled eggs. And they gave him the Irish Times instead of the Daily Telegraph he had ordered.

Furious, he picked up the phone and complained bitterly to the poor woman on the desk. She listened patiently, with great understanding but at the end said: "Well now, you're awake, aren't you? You've got something to eat and something to read while you eat. I'd say you're not too badly off."

This is rejoicing Sunday, a day that reminds us of the goodness that is very near to us and challenges us to recognise it. A day that invites us to take hold of the Good News, to open ourselves to what God can do in our lives. There are so many opportunities for us to grow, to learn, to explore new possibilities, to enjoy and appreciate our lives, to come close to God and each other, to make a difference to our world. The first words of Mark's gospel are "The beginning of the Good News about Jesus Christ..." Let today be a beginning for us, when we open our ears to hearing good news, and open our hearts to the opportunity life gives us now.

The figure of John the Baptist is a bit strange to us – a man dressed in clothes made of camel skin, eating locusts and wild honey. Yet perhaps he has something to teach us, because he is the one who was able to sense the promise in the air, who felt good news stirring, who could tell "someone is coming." And maybe it did have something to do with the fact that he lived in the desert, sleeping with only the stars overhead, that place of immense silence, where all the distractions and frenzy fade away; that place of simplicity, with no clutter or rush; that place where he could see and hear again. Perhaps we could give ourselves that gift – some time to be simple, to listen, to rediscover ourselves as a child of God.

It reminds me of a poem by the Irish poet, Patrick Kavanagh, called “Advent”. It begins: “We have tested and tasted too much, lover – through a chink too wide there comes in no wonder.” Perhaps we are too jaded, too busy, too tired out by too much of everything, too frazzled, our lives too frantic, too full of all we think we need to do or have - that we haven’t the time or the space to pick up that sense of promise or wonder.

“We have tested and tasted too much ...
Through a chink too wide there comes in no wonder.”

The poet, by rediscovering a sense of simplicity, wants to in his own words “charm back the luxury of a child's soul.” He remembers the wonder of a child when life was fresh and he speaks of;
“the newness that was in every stale thing
when we looked at it as children: the spirit-shocking
wonder in a black slanting Ulster hill
or the prophetic astonishment in the tedious talking
of an old fool will awake for us and bring
you and me to the yard gate to watch the whins
and the bog-holes, cart-tracks, old stables where Time begins.”

He speaks of the joy to be found “*Wherever life pours ordinary plenty.*” God becoming flesh, a little child, now to be found in the ordinary and most earthy. I remember taking a school group from a very built up area on a day trip to a park. During the afternoon one of the kids wandered off. I went looking for him and eventually found him standing on a rock in the middle of a stream – watching leaves floating down on the water. Absolutely spellbound, completely lost in his fascination and wonder. I thought to myself – what we walk by every day without even noticing!

I remember also reading the description of a young woman going to her first classical concert. It was in the days before record players or cd’s or any form of musical recording. You only got to hear the performance live and you had to live on the memory, nothing else. But did she miss out because of that? No! Her description of her total attention, of how hearing a whole orchestra for the first time affected

her, how she was carried away by the music, how it shook her to the very core. Perhaps she *heard* more music than we will ever hear, even with all the technology at our disposal – how often do we ever really listen to music? “We have tested and tasted too much” – we walk by without seeing, or hearing, or tasting, the sweetness and miracle of life.

Perhaps it is time for us to recover something of what we have lost. A sense of wonder and appreciation of life - to take time to open our eyes to the world around us.

Rejoice the Lord is near. He is there “wherever life pours ordinary plenty.” He has already sown the seeds of the kingdom of heaven within us and around us - every day hoping we will nourish them and allow them to grow. Hoping we will notice the sunrise, the beauty of the leaves, the autumn light, the fading of the evening, the stars at night. Hoping we will let ourselves rejoice in friends and family given to us to cherish, that we will welcome the stranger we meet who may have so much to teach, the chance encounter heavy laden with possibility, the stuff of everyday encounters which nourish us in countless ways. Hoping we will stop our headlong rush into the future, and our unquestioned sense of dissatisfaction with the present. As the prophet Zephaniah says:

Throw away the cloak of despondency,
take off your dress of sorrow and distress...

Rejoice, exult with all your heart.

The Lord is in your midst.

He will exult with joy over you,

he will renew you by his love.

(Zephaniah 3:14-15, 17)

Or the Song of Songs:

My Beloved lifts up his voice,

he says to me,

‘Come then, my love, my lovely one, come.

For see, winter is past,

the rains are over and gone.

The flowers appear on the earth.

The season of glad songs has come,
the cooing of the turtledove is heard in our land.
The fig tree is forming its first figs
and the blossoming vines give out their fragrance.
(*Song of Songs 2:8-14*)

Take time to wake up to wonder, to enjoy and appreciate the company of family and friends. To rediscover what they say is our natural sense of spirituality, of God's presence around us and within us – the God who is beside you in a way unique to you, closer than your own breath - a sense so easily drowned out by noise and activity. To take time to reawaken, to listen to that sense again.

Perhaps that is what Jesus means when he keeps on saying: “be awake, for the Master is coming”. God becoming flesh, God among us, God a little child in an old stable where Time begins. “Wake up, rejoice, for the Master is coming. The season of glad songs is coming.”

Suggestions

(1) Live your life today noticing – the people you meet, the world around you...

(2) Are there seeds in your life you would like to nourish – things you haven't done. A phone call, a card or letter, getting in touch with an old friend, revisiting an important place, rereading a book that inspired you.

(3) Is there anyone in your life who inspires you, who impresses you, who might have something to teach you? What might it be? How will you let that happen?

(4) Take time for quiet – to simplify life, to let the rush quieten down. To let yourself just rest, look around, hear the “still small voice of calm.” Let yourself just be – no agenda. Just to sit.

(5) Go for a walk and look around – enjoy life happening all around you.

(6) Perhaps take a quiet time at the end of each day to remember what happened during the day that you are grateful for, or for good things and possibilities you might have missed or noticed but passed by.

(7) I have attached a series of scripture readings as well as the poem by Patrick Kavanagh. Why not take some time to read them slowly and let them sink in? If one in particular strikes you, let it stay with you throughout the day.

READINGS

Advent

We have tested and tasted too much, lover-
Through a chink too wide there comes in no wonder.
But here in the Advent-darkened room
Where the dry black bread and the sugarless tea
Of penance will charm back the luxury
Of a child's soul, we'll return to Doom
The knowledge we stole but could not use.

And the newness that was in every stale thing
When we looked at it as children: the spirit-shocking
Wonder in a black slanting Ulster hill
Or the prophetic astonishment in the tedious talking
Of an old fool will awake for us and bring
You and me to the yard gate to watch the whins
And the bog-holes, cart-tracks, old stables where Time begins.

O after Christmas we'll have no need to go searching
For the difference that sets an old phrase burning-
We'll hear it in the whispered argument of a churning
Or in the streets where the village boys are lurching.
And we'll hear it among decent men too
Who barrow dung in gardens under trees,
Wherever life pours ordinary plenty.
Won't we be rich, my love and I, and
God we shall not ask for reason's payment,
The why of heart-breaking strangeness in dreeping hedges
Nor analyse God's breath in common statement.
We have thrown into the dust-bin the clay-minted wages
Of pleasure, knowledge and the conscious hour-

And Christ comes with a January flower.
(*Patrick Kavanagh*)

Let the wilderness and the dry-lands exult,
let the wasteland rejoice and bloom,
let it bring forth flowers like the jonquil,
let it rejoice and sing for joy.
(*Isaiah 35:1-6,10*)

In this place of which you say,
'It is a wasteland' ...
there shall be heard again the voice of mirth
and the voice of gladness,
the voices of those who sing.
(*Isaiah 33:10-11*)

"You know 'the time' has come: you must wake up now:
our salvation is even nearer than you think.
The night is almost over, it will be daylight soon."
(*Romans 13:11-14*)

Filled with joy by the Holy Spirit, Jesus said, "I bless you, Father,
Lord of heaven and of earth, for hiding these things from the learned
and the clever and revealing them to mere children. Yes, Father, for
that is what it pleased you to do." (*Luke 10:21-24*)

"People of Zion, you will live in Jerusalem and weep no more. He
will be gracious to you when he hears your cry; when he hears he will
answer... He who is your teacher will hide no longer, and you will
see your teacher with your own eyes. Whether you turn to right or
left, your ears will hear these words behind you, 'This is the way,
follow it.' (*Isaiah 30:19-21,23-26*)

"For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for
your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then
when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you.
When you search for me, you will find me." (*Jeremiah 29:11-13*)

Throw away the cloak of despondency,

take off your dress of sorrow and distress...
Rejoice, exult with all your heart.
The Lord is in your midst.
He will exult with joy over you,
he will renew you by his love.
(*Zephaniah 3:14-15, 17*)

My Beloved lifts up his voice,
he says to me,
‘Come then, my love, my lovely one, come.
For see, winter is past,
the rains are over and gone.
The flowers appear on the earth.
The season of glad songs has come,
the cooing of the turtledove is heard in our land.
The fig tree is forming its first figs
and the blossoming vines give out their fragrance.
(*Song of Songs 2:8-14*)

“Look, I am standing at the door, knocking.
If one of you hears me calling and opens the door,
I will come in to share his meal, side by side with him.”
(*Revelation 3:20*)