

12-11-11, 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday Advent (Gaudete Sun). Is 61:1-2a, 10-11; 1 Thess 5:16-24; Jn 1:6-8, 19-28.

Seventeen years ago, my family signed up to host a girl from Northern Ireland. At that time Northern Ireland had been in a state of social unrest for many years. Political and economic injustices created a climate that fostered violence and terrorism between Protestants and Catholics. Back in the 1970s, some Minnesotans formed The Children's Program of Northern Ireland – a program that would give Irish youngsters the opportunity to be free from the tensions of their country for six weeks during the summer, by staying with families in Minnesota and Wisconsin. So in 1994 my family hosted Claire, a shy 11-year old Catholic girl from a town near Belfast. Claire was quite young to leave home for six weeks, and she was experiencing a lot of homesickness. During that same summer we had a young, charismatic priest assisting here at St. John Cantius parish. After our first Sunday Mass with Claire, she seemed especially joyful. As we drove home from church, Claire commented that she wasn't used to that kind of preaching in Northern Ireland – preaching that lifted her spirits. I was very grateful for the gift of joy that that priest instilled in our young guest on that summer morning.

Today, the third Sunday of Advent, is called Gaudete Sunday – “Rejoice Sunday” in Latin. Today's Scripture readings each announce a call to joy. Our first reading was from Isaiah. Isaiah was the great prophet of joy, hope, and expectation. His prophetic words came over a period of time when Israel was steeped in sadness and political difficulties. Isaiah proclaimed that God would answer the prayers of his people and be their shepherd.

In our second reading, St. Paul's letter to the Thessalonians is likewise charged with joy. The faith of that Christian community was shaken by doubt and growing confusion about the end of time and Christ's expected return. Paul himself had experienced beatings, hunger, shipwreck, and imprisonment. Nevertheless, he called for rejoicing! Paul's words were an encouragement

to those who, strengthened by the Spirit, were able to maintain a prayerful and holy readiness as they awaited their Lord.

John the Baptist is featured again in today's Gospel. The gospel writer proclaims that John the Baptist was a witness to the light who is Jesus. As living light, Jesus dispelled the darkness of our human condition in order to empower us to find our joy in God.

In various ways we all live in challenging times. Whether our challenges are financial, physical, or relational, today's Scriptures remind us to seek and express the joy of our salvation. *Jesus Christ is present to us here and now*, in this assembly of faithful people, in the person of our priest, and in the sacrament of the Eucharist.

I'd like to conclude this homily with another story about Ireland, a story of joy in the midst of trials, an advent story. Back in the 17th century, the British invaded Ireland. At that time Britain had become a Protestant nation, and Ireland was strongly Catholic. The British soldiers persecuted the Irish Catholics, and priests had to carry out their ministry in secret. Before Christmas, some Catholic families would place candles in their windows. When the suspicious British soldiers would question them about the purpose of those candles, they were told that they were a sign for Joseph, Mary, and Jesus looking for a home, an invitation that the Holy Family would be welcome there. Dismissing that custom as superstitious, the soldiers would leave them alone. In reality, the Irish Catholics were using those candles as a sign that a priest could find a safe place to celebrate Mass in their home on that sacred night.

As we put up our Christmas lights in preparation for Christmas, we are invited to make them more than just decorations, but rather, lights that announce the dawning of a new day of liberation and joy, and a real welcome for the Spirit of Christ in our hearts and in our homes. Throughout these days of advent *we* are asked to be light and joy to a world that lies increasingly in darkness and slavery to sin.