

## REJOICE – THAT IS WHAT GOD EXPECTS OF US

There are many events in our lives we cannot forget no matter how much we try. We cannot forget the first time we fell in love, the butterflies we felt in our stomach and our first date. For those who are married, you cannot forget your first dance, your honeymoon and certainly your first row/disagreement. As a newly ordained priest, you do not forget the first time you celebrated each of the 7 Sacraments of the Church. One of such was the FIRST WEDDING I officiated at in Jersey. I remember it vividly as if it was yesterday.

During one of my meetings with the couple to plan their big day, we went through the various hymns they have chosen; one choice of theirs stood out for me. Before we settled down to look at the hymns they had chosen, the bride asked if we could look first look at the Post-Communion Hymn, before delving into the others. When I asked why she wanted to discuss that hymn first, she told me that she would like everyone who would attend the wedding to sing a particular hymn that has kept her sane and made her shed tears of joy whenever she heard it. According to the bride, that hymn consoled her when she lost her mum to cancer and the same hymn brought her enormous joy when she fell in love; in fact, it was why that hymn played that her fiancé proposed to her. That hymn is no other than – **Rejoice! The Lord is King, written by Charles Wesley.**

Around 1744, Charles Wesley got the inspiration to write this hymn from today's Entrance Antiphon which comes from the letter of St Paul to the Philippians 4:4-5. St Paul wrote that letter while he was suffering in prison; that notwithstanding, he admonished the early Christians to rejoice continually no matter what. Charles Wesley composed this hymn at a time when he had little to rejoice about. He and his brother John were busy spreading the Gospel in England and they encountered violent opposition. On one occasion, a mob nearly destroyed the house where they were staying and drove their horses into a pond. The people whom they converted were often harassed and persecuted. But they found great joy in serving Christ and called other Christians to do the same. It was while going through these trials that Charles Wesley wrote these joyful words, "**Rejoice, the Lord is King! Your Lord and King adore**"—Those words could only come from a heart that is joyful. It is this same attitude of joy and rejoicing, that the Church calls on all of us to adopt on this GAUDETE SUNDAY – JOYFUL/REJOICING SUNDAY.

This same joyful/rejoicing motif that we encounter in today's Entrance Antiphon is what we encounter in our Second Reading from the First Letter of St Paul to the Thessalonians Chapter 5. The English version of this reading which we heard today does not do it justice; the Greek version has it thus: ***Pantote Chairete*** – Rejoice Always. ***Chairete*** comes from the Greek word – ***Chairo***, which means to rejoice, to be glad, and to rejoice exceeding. This is why the complete Greek rendition of that line is: "**Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is what God expects you to do in Christ Jesus.**" Yes, ***Chairo*** means to enjoy a state of gladness/joy and to be exceedingly delighted. This state of gladness/joy is one that nobody and no situation

can take away from us no matter how much they try. However, this state of gladness/joy/rejoicing has its profound foundation in the Lord as we hear in today's First Reading from Isaiah Chapter 6. Yes, the Spirit of the Lord has been given to us for the Lord has anointed us to:

- Bring Good News to the poor,
- Bind up hearts that are broken,
- Proclaim liberty to captives,
- Proclaim freedom to those in prison, and
- Proclaim a year of favour from the Lord.

The above are the bases of our state of gladness and rejoicing because the Lord is coming to liberate us from our old ways of life and inaugurate a new dispensation for us. He is not coming to condemn us or cast us into Hell Fire, but to inject new life into us. This is why the Angel told the shepherds in Luke 2:10 – I bring you news of great joy. Yes, the Child to be born to us has only one mission – THAT OF JOY!!!

My friends, on this Gaudete Sunday, we are reminded that Christianity is a Religion of Joy and not sadness. It is a Religion that liberates people instead of enslaving them. It is a Religion that consoles people instead of upsetting them.

However, there is one irrefutable observation that has always bothered me concerning Christians in general and Catholics in particular—**Many of us wear gloomy looks while in Church, and I cannot wrap my head around it.** Is our God so serious that we cannot be happy and relaxed in his presence? Or do we think God would be so mad at us if we are happy, smiley, and relaxed in His presence? I wonder why? On the 15th of November 2023, Pope Francis celebrated the 10th Anniversary of his 1st Apostolic Exhortation — *Evangelii Gaudium*, and sent us a clear but strong message: **“The Christian message, as we have heard from the angel’s words to the shepherds, is the proclamation of “a great joy”... Either we proclaim Jesus with joy, or we do not proclaim him, because another way of proclaiming him is not capable of bringing the true reality of Jesus. This is why a discontent Christian, a sad Christian, a dissatisfied, or worse still, resentful, or rancorous Christian, is not credible.”**

My friends, I do not know about you; one thing is clear to me, from everything I have read, heard, and felt about God and Heaven, there is no room for sadness and gloomy faces, but joy, rejoicing and eternal happiness. Like the couple above who are always consoled by John Wesley’s Hymn – Rejoice! The Lord is King, let us remember that our God is a God of joy and not sadness, gloomy faces, and moody looks. Yes, lift up your heart, lift up your voice, rejoice, again, I say, rejoice. **GAUDETE IN DOMINO SEMPER!**

Fr Johnpromise Umeozuru

Homily for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent, Year B (Gaudete Sunday) 17/12/2023