

Readings: *Zephaniah 3:14 – 18; Canticle Isaiah 12: 2 – 6; Philippians 4: 4 – 7; Luke 3: 10 – 18.*

Rejoice in the Lord always: again I say rejoice.

These words from today's reading from Paul's letter to the Christians of Philippi are a kind of chorus to the liturgy of this Sunday, giving it the title *Gaudete* – that is "Rejoice!" – and explaining the customs of using rose coloured vestments and hangings, and of singing more joyful hymns. On the equivalent – fourth – Sunday in Lent these customs are meant as a short relief from the purple of our Lenten discipline, but *Gaudete* Sunday has a different function. It should serve to remind us that joy is one of the themes of the whole of Advent, as the Church looks forward to the coming of the Lord.

The first reading, probably (like last Sunday's reading from Baruch) coming from the time of Israel's exile in Babylon, encourages the city of Jerusalem to rejoice. The exile and the destruction of the temple had made people think that the LORD had totally deserted them, but the prophet knows better: *The LORD you God is in your midst, a victorious warrior. He will exult with joy over you, he will renew you with his love.* So they are not to be afraid of what seems to threaten them. Paul's letter to the Philippians brings a similar message. They too are to rejoice, because *the LORD is very near, so there is no need to worry.* They can rely on the Lord to provide whatever they need.

Between the two readings, instead of a psalm, we join in a canticle from the prophecy of Isaiah (again probably coming from the time of the Exile). We acknowledge with joy that God is with us as our saviour and hear again the call: *Rejoice...for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.* After these three calls to rejoicing the Gospel reading may seem to be more of a warning than an encouragement. John the Baptist calls his contemporaries – and us – not to be like the unwanted chaff at harvest, which will be burnt *in a fire that will never go out.*

But the reading ends with the evangelist telling us that the purpose of John's teaching was *to announce the Good News.* And the *Good News* John announces is the same as in the earlier passages from scripture – that the LORD is coming to bring salvation to his people.

That remains the message which we celebrate with joy today.