

Advent III, 2024

Zephaniah 3:14-end; Phil.4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

Rejoice, rejoice, repent.

Why is the third candle on the Advent wreath pink?

The answer has got nothing to do with the Virgin Mary. Not only do we have no inkling that she was especially partial to pink, or indeed that any first century Jewish girl was, but today isn't even the day when we focus on Mary. That's Advent IV, next week. Today, the focus is traditionally on John the Baptist, and *he* is even more difficult to connect convincingly with the colour pink.

No, it's an old liturgical custom that on the 3rd Sunday of Advent the priest would robe in pink, instead of the usual Advent purple. And the idea behind that was that purple was the traditional colour for penitence and fasting. Advent, you see, was meant to be a time of spiritual austerity, of serious discipline and going without, getting ready for the feast of Christmas. Our way of doing it, of cracking out the mince pies and the mulled wine and carols for the whole month – if not from even *before* Advent – would have struck previous generations of Christians as very odd and very spiritually unhealthy. And at the risk of sounding like a misery guts, perhaps we need to remember that in this as in so much our ancestors were not stupid. We could well learn from them. But in all that fasting, even they needed a break – and this Sunday was it. This Sunday was called 'Gaudete Sunday', 'Rejoice Sunday'. All the emphasis today was on the joy and glory that is coming, and for that reason the penitential purple was put to one side for the day, and out came the pink robes – and in due course, the pink advent candle.

And that's why some people will tell you that the third Advent Candle is all about joy, and not about – as I was always taught – John the Baptist.

Well, no doubt debate on that point will continue. But the question over the candle does symbolise nicely an interesting collision of themes in today's service and readings. Think of those three readings: Zephaniah, Philippians, Luke. If you had to sum them up in one word each, not a bad try would be: Rejoice; rejoice; repent. Rejoice, rejoice, repent. Zephaniah and Paul are simply bursting out of themselves with joy: rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say rejoice! Sing aloud o daughter Zion, shout o Israel, rejoice and exult with all your heart o daughter Jerusalem! And then comes along John the Baptist, in Luke: 'you brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath that is to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance!' Rejoice, rejoice, screeching change of gears ... repent.

Now it would be easy to hear this as simple contradiction – as if there are sunny people in life, and miserable people, and today Zephaniah and Paul are in the first category, and John the second. There would be no convincing way of bringing what they say together.

Unsurprisingly, I don't think that is quite what is going on. Rather, try this thought for size. What if these readings belong together because together they say something like this: What is coming towards you, what is about to break upon you, is so awesomely and stupendously joyful, so deliriously wonderful, that currently you are utterly unprepared for it? Your life, as you are currently leading it, bears about as much resemblance to your destiny as a fox barking does to a Mozart concerto. So repent! Change! Turn around, get ready, because you are about to be swept up in something astonishing. Rejoice, rejoice, repent is not a contradiction – the last thought flows perfectly out of the first.

Now, you might think that it is a little unfair to say that you are *quite* so far out of shape in terms of the gap between your life now and what we are getting ready for. 'Brood of vipers' might seem just *a little* harsh, and I hope and I trust that you would indeed be right to feel that way. Most of us, most of the time, are not *that* bad – though it is always worth remembering that many of us, some of the time, really are. Be that as it may, the key thing to remember is that, next to what we're hoping for, next to what is breaking upon us, 'not that bad' is really very inadequate indeed.

Because we are waiting to celebrate, at Christmas, the joining of divine life with human life. We are waiting to welcome perfect joy, perfect beauty, perfect holiness into the world. And more than that, every Advent we remind ourselves that this is not just about Christmas, not just about remembering an event in the past, but about waiting, hoping, anticipating the time when divine life will flood through our whole world. Everyone will become like Jesus, or else vanish away. Everything will become like Jesus, or else vanish away. Perfect joy, perfect beauty, perfect love and holiness will flow through each of us. It is almost impossible to believe, harder still to put into words, but that is what we are hoping for. One of the bishops of the ancient church put it best. Athanasius of Alexandria said this: God became human so that we might become divine. God became human so that we might become divine.

Now, next to *that*, 'not so bad' suddenly sounds not so good. Going into a destiny like that, how could our lives *not* need to change, and to keep on changing – as St. Paul puts it somewhere, to change from glory into glory? If you keep your eyes on where we are going, then you will know that our lives – however good we are – will always need to be changing, always need to be drawing closer to that which we will one day become.

And if all this begins to sound too mysterious and abstract, is it not wonderful that John the Baptist spells out very clearly precisely what he means by repentance? Just *how* should your life change so that you are ready for the glory that is to come? Why, says John, whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none. Whoever has food must do likewise. Tax collectors should not rip people off, as they so often did; soldiers should not throw their weight around and bully people. In other words, getting ready for glory means loving your neighbour – and loving your neighbour means making sure they have enough to eat, that there is justice, that people live free of fear and intimidation. It means in other words, things like the Food Bank – and not only putting food in the box, but asking why it has to be there in the first place. Learning about the politics and the economics and the culture that makes Food Banks a necessity – and committing to stop them, even if that costs us. *That's* repentance, or part of it. And as with food, so with many other aspects of injustice, of people's basic human dignity. What are we doing so that all get treated as who they really are: the sons and daughters of God, destined for his glory?

Rejoice, rejoice, repent. Zephaniah, Paul, the Baptist: may all three speak deep within us this morning and may our lives change in response. Amen.