

Joy in the darkness

Third Sunday of Advent

Fr Michael Smith SJ

Readings: Is35:1-6,10, Ps145(146):6-10, James 5:7-10, Is61:1(Lk4:18), Matthew 11:2-11

Be joyful! Rejoice! Advent is not really a sad time, despite the purple worn at Mass. More a time of longing, of waiting for the darkness in the world to be lit up by the coming of Jesus Christ at Christmas. Today we light the pink candle on the advent wreath. Alone among the sombre purple candles, it's like a moment of anticipation of the joy that is coming.

The sadness that is the backdrop for the coming festivities is hinted at in the readings. It is the sadness of those who can't cope, can't sort out their lives that seem to have gone so wrong. 'Strengthen all the weary hands, steady the trembling knees, say to the faint hearted 'Courage!' says the first reading as it promises 'a time of everlasting joy . . . sorrow and lament will be ended.' (Isaiah 35:3-4, 10)

In the Gospel, Jesus sends a message to John the Baptist, who is in prison, shortly to be murdered there. He seems to have been wondering whether Jesus really is the Messiah they were expecting but Jesus reassures him by pointing out the healing He has brought to the blind, the lame, the lepers and the poor. John was in a time of darkness, despair even, but there was joy all around.

The message of the scripture readings is that Advent brings joy to those who are poor, destitute, sick or in need of healing.

Working in the JRS Day Centre, I see that joy so clearly in the darkness. The refugees who come are all destitute, with no means of support apart from charities and friends. They are in constant danger of being suddenly seized and deported, often back to a situation of danger and threat. How they cope with all this I don't know, but so many come with an expression of joy on their faces. Here they are provided with a hot lunch, a little money for travel to the doctor or the home office, finding a GP, someone to go with them if they have to go to court, legal advice, and help with finding somewhere to stay.

Just before Christmas we'll have a special meal – not turkey and sprouts but some of the delicious treats from our friends' home countries. Before that there will be a delivery of hundreds of coats so our friends can all pick one for the winter.

It's the kind of joy that comes to us all at Christmas, but for our refugee friends I think it must be especially powerful given the adversity they face – 'joy and gladness will go with them, and sorrow and lament be ended'. (Isaiah 35:6).

In the evening, when our friends have all gone back to wherever they can find to spend the night, we sit down and reflect on the day.

Perhaps in the whole scheme of things I didn't achieve very much for them, but still, I find my heart is full of joy too.