Come, Lord Jesus Part 3

December 11th, 2016

Advent 3

The coming of the Lord Jesus is an occasion for joy. It was an occasion of joy for Mary and Elizabeth, who celebrated their good tidings in expressions of affection and spontaneous exuberance. The gospel of Luke says, "And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord" (Luke 1:41-45). There are two kinds of joy reflected in this text: the spontaneous, surprising kind of joy—like an unexpected gift. And there is another kind. This is the joy that Elizabeth attributes to Mary: "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord." This second kind of joy is the joy of waiting and looking forward. It is the kind of joy that comes through the contemplative disposition that James speaks of in our lectionary reading today: "Be patient, therefore…until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. You also, be patient. Establish your hearts for the coming of the Lord is at hand…Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful" (James 5:7-11). Virgil also spoke of the time in between harvests—they were far from being "empty times," but seasons for preparing, for joyfully undertaking the craft of caring for the earth that would once again produce: "And as soon as the vineyard drops its leaves in the fall, and the frigid North Wind shakes the summer's bounty from the woods, the passionate farmer extends his planning to the coming year and attacks the dormant vine, cutting it back with Saturn's curved pruning hook and trims it into shape. Be the first to break up the earth, first to burn the cuttings you've piled up, and first to store your support stakes in the shed. Be the last to gather grapes" (Virgil, *Georgics*. tr. Janet Lembke. II.403-409. New Haven: Yale, 2005. 34-35). And he also says, "Wheat rejoices in winter dust fields, too, rejoice" (I.101, pg. 6). In other words, it need not be a winter of discontent. While there are indeed times when the Lord wishes us to be passive and to passively receive His grace, the seasons of seeming inaction can also be very productive for us, seasons when we use the time we have to be joyful.

One might argue that this is all very archaic and unsuitable to our modern times. Not many of us cultivate the land, and fewer still read Virgil or the Bible. And yet, all of us wait in one way or another. Most of us work and look forward to things, whether it is a paycheck, some books one might purchase with the paycheck, a night out with a special friend, or even seasonal celebrations. It is fun to count down the days until something is going to happen. There are even apps for your smartphones that will help you indulge this particular kind of joy. Some of my very secular neighbours put a lot of time and energy into decorating the roadside trees with fantastic circles of lights that glow every night for most of Advent. I do not know what they are looking forward to, but I know that they enjoy looking forward to it. How is it, then, that both surprises and slow, expectant waiting can be expressions or experiences of the same joy? The answer lies in the nature of joy itself. Joy is not just an emotion. Joy is Being—the very Being of God. Thomas Aquinas says, "The ultimate good we have been speaking of contains perpetual and full joy. Our Lord was thinking of this when He bade us, in John 16:24: 'Ask and you shall receive, that your joy may be full.' Full joy, however, can be gained from no creature, but only from God, in whom the entire plenitude of goodness resides. And so our Lord says to the faithful servant in Matthew 25:21, 'Entre thou into the joy of thy Lord,' that thou mayest have joy of thy Lord." (Thomas Aquinas, *Aquinas's Own Shorter Summa*. Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 2002. 362). I believe that every good surprise, every new inspiration, every unexpected epiphany returns us to God, to the everlasting joy of God; likewise I believe that our more quiet joys, our patient joys, our hard working joys return us to the joy of the living God. Whether spontaneous or slow, visceral or mental, our joy is a return to God in some way, and if not an actual return than an invitation to return, a foretaste or glimpse of what God is like.

When we are sick, as I have been this past week, we are not looking for something new as much as something old—the state of our bodies before we got sick. When we are heartbroken after a failed relationship, we do not eat ice cream and listen to the same songs over and over again because we are ready for the new—no, in this state we are still thinking of the old—the state of our minds and bodies before our hearts were broken. And likewise, in our more existential, meditative moments, the more we look into the future, we are perhaps also looking into the past—a lost past, a lost Eden. We are looking for our true nature before the Fall, before sin and death became the reality of existence. These are not examples of joyfully returning to joy, but they are examples of our desire to return to joy. After the cold medicine starts to take effect, after we change the music and eat less ice cream, we begin to open up to something new—not because we no longer wish to return to joy, but because we realize that the only way to return to joy is to be joyful, to cultivate joy in some way. It begins very small, just as faith begins as small as a mustard seed—but it eventually blossoms. I very much doubt if any human being ever stops searching for joy. Our sins, as misguided and horrible as they can be, are often desperate and hopelessly wrong attempts to return to joy. The thief steals in the hope of getting enough to get out of the gang or set himself up for a carefree life. The drug addict needs just one more fix so that he can get himself together and move on from his inner demons. The streetwalker turns one more trick because she is saving up to start a new life. One more lie, one more affair, one more dishonest transaction, one more office intrigue, one more argument, one more fight—and surely all will be well again. Of course, it usually does not work out that way. And yet all are searching for joy.

Our quest for joy is one of the surest signs that joy exists and that God exists. If it were not the case, then life is absurd, we are completely irrational and should embrace absurdity and irrationality; we are hopeless and sad creatures. And yet, there is not a single culture that I can think of that does not have its own forms of celebration and jubilation. There is not a single human being alive that would honestly say suffering is better than joy, depression better than euphoria. One of the reasons why we can even hope to communicate with others is that we are able to look for common joys, a language of joy that binds us together, transcending cultural or linguistic differences. It is often said that jokes cannot be translated—and yet laughter is universal—and I have seen people who could not communicate in words laugh their heads off together. Even the deaf and the mute laugh. It has been said by many professional translators that great works of literature cannot be properly translated—and yet there they are hypocritically translating—because the inner joy of certain books cannot be diminished by what is lost in translation and what is lost on translators. The translator is thus never a traitor, as the old proverb says, but a bearer of good tidings. Joy is our hope of being able to relate to one another. Infants and toddlers laugh together before they have even discovered language or reason. That should give all of us hope.

How, then, do we rejoice as we wait? How do we rejoice in the colorless landscape of the quotidian? How do we return to God? Earlier in Advent, we looked at the Beatitudes as the qualities of peace. That was true to the spirit of the Beatitudes, but actually—the literal and immediate meaning of the Beatitudes is that we will be happy with divine happiness—μακαριοι, *beati*—beatified if we are poor in spirit, joyful if we hunger and thirst for righteousness, blissful when we are meek. We will rejoice and be exceedingly glad when we walk in the way that Jesus walked. You do not learn to swim by listening to a lecture on swimming. It might help you avoid some dangers of the swimming pool or the seaside, but essentially, you learn to swim by swimming. And you learn to write by writing, and you learn to rejoice by rejoicing. To rejoice means to be grateful, to be open to the gifts of the Holy Spirit, to be ready for the movement of the Holy Spirit, to be attentive to the Word that is spoken from God, to be diligent in cultivating joy, to be happy about embracing joy. And sometimes there is the joy of abstaining or bypassing pleasures, as even the ancient philosopher Epicurus once said. We willingly forgo some joys in the expectation of greater joys to come. Without some concept of joy, this would never make any sense. It would make no sense to skip the after dinner dessert or that extra pint of ale, but we do abstain because we know the value that comes from it. The joy of waiting is the joy of planting seeds that will bear fruit. This is even more so in the spiritual life. The apostle Paul says, "Whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not grow weary in doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith" (Galatians 6:7-9). This is perhaps best illustrated by a tale that Masanobu Fukuoka tells in his book *One Straw Revolution.* There was a poor farmer who had to travel back and forth across various mountain roads, and he would always collect little bits of straw or manure. Eventually, he became quite well off—because he knew how to maximize the very little things along life's way. Incidentally, while this is something that actually happened in the last century, there is an old, old folktale from Japan that pretty much goes the same way. Gosukedon, a peasant, undertakes a pilgrimage to joy that begins when he follows the instructions of a divine being to pick up a single piece of straw on the road. And I think that is very much like life. When we are too good to pick up straw, we are too good for joy. The roads of life are strewn with straw and seeds, they are strewn with pieces of joy for us to collect and sow and someday harvest. Perhaps these pieces of straw are the gifts we collect to bring to Christ, just as the Magi brought gifts to the infant Jesus. What are the gifts that God desires most? Your animated hearts, your redeemed lives, your daily rejoicing as you gather and sow to the Holy Spirit and give cheerfully of yourself in every task you undertake. Joy is not just the reception of gifts—it is the giving of gifts. For this reason, Paul says: "Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:6-7). And elsewhere, he quotes the Lord Jesus, saying: "Remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”" (Acts 20:35). To have joy is to give yourself to God, to give yourself to your life, to give yourself to the road at your feet, the work before your hands, the things you will live through today, to the present. I had a wonderful epiphany about a week ago. A young woman in her 70s or 80s with ice-blue eyes and a very animated spirit preached the Good News to me on the street in the rain for about half an hour. It was one of the best sermons I have ever heard. She was filled with light, filled with the joy of God. And she taught me one secret of joy. She asked me: "Who is the most important person in your life? What is the most important thing you possess? What is the most important time in your life?" After I stumbled with some inadequate answers, she said, "The most important person in your life is the person right in front of you, the one God sent or manifested himself through. The most important thing you have is the good that you can do. And the most important time in your life is right now, the present." What a joyful person and what a joyful message. She radiated beauty—the very beauty of Christ. I would have gladly listened to this Advent angel for hours, but she had other people to enlighten! Joy is the ultimate animation of the body and the mind. It is the elegance of our souls at their maximum. And as we wait for the coming glory of Jesus and our own coming resurrections and glorifications, we may joyfully work, joyfully wait, and joyfully be the people Christ has called us to be, people who meditate on the joys of His coming and are joyful in this meditation. To be joyful is to remember our purpose, our meaning, our walkway beneath our feet. Our path is leading to eternal redemption. Our path is leading to the perfection of joy, to return to our true home in God. If you have not given yourself to Jesus, then follow Him, and know what true joy is. Be baptized and receive the Holy Spirit and let the Holy Spirit fill you with the love of God and the joy of being transformed into the likeness of Christ. And if you have believed God and followed His Son who was born in our flesh and glorified in his death and resurrection, but have somehow lost your way, either spiritually, emotionally or otherwise—then return to the One who waits for all prodigal children, who rejoices whenever someone returns. Great is the rejoicing in heaven over the lost sheep that returns. Rejoice, everyone, rejoice! Christ is coming! Christ is coming!