

The Advent liturgy is full of exhortations to **rejoice**. *Gaudete in Domino semper*. Rejoice in the Lord, always. The rose candle and vestments today serve as a reminder that Advent is a *season* of rejoicing because it revives the expectation of the most joyful event in history: the birth of the Son of God by the Virgin Mary.

But what if we can't, or feel that we can't, or fear that we can't rejoice?

There is all too much in many of our lives, in the lives of those who are dear to us, in the life of the world at the moment, to dismay us, to weigh us down and to oppress us. How can we rejoice in such a world, at such a time?

It's also true that these weeks fill many people with dread. As Christmas approaches, there are so many in our communities who would prefer not to be around all these celebrations. There is the burden of depression and grief, which can be exacerbated by the darkness and the sometimes-forced festiveness — that parody of joy that can become deeply unsatisfying. Others may be living with financial stress, or emotional stress or family stress — burdens which may go unseen to others, but are not unknown to God of course.

So, can Christmas be full of joy in the midst of such heavy circumstances?

Can the homeless share in the rejoicing? Do we see joy on the faces of the men and women at the night shelter? We perhaps see cheerfulness and humour, as they appreciate the basic comforts we can offer, but joy?

We need, I think, to rid ourselves of any idea that joy is the same as jollity; that joy requires us constantly to be whistling a happy tune or grinning when we really feel like groaning.

Although jollity and joy are related, they are not the same. Jollity or happiness tends to be linked to external circumstances, like receiving the item that tops your Christmas wish list; while joy springs from deep within.

Our Heavenly Father invites us at Christmas time to come and see the Christ Child. There is nothing like Him. He's the most beautiful baby in the world. He's the Prince of Peace, the King of Kings, the Messiah, Emmanuel, the Resurrection and the Life. And God gives Him freely to us because He loves us. When we begin to comprehend this gift, an overwhelming emotion, which often leaves us speechless, surrounds us. That's Joy.

It's an experience that doesn't exist this fully apart from Christ. Joy apart from Christ is a good mood; it's a thrill; it's a momentary pleasure; a satisfaction that is fleeting. Permanent joy, deep joy, is symptomatic of knowing Christ, and living *in* Christ.

Certainly, Mary and Joseph must have known it, and Anna and Simeon, and the others who caught a glimpse of the glory of another world in the child of Bethlehem. Let's pray that we'll glimpse that glory, and find that joy this year.

To know that God is not distant but close, not indifferent but compassionate, not aloof but a merciful Father who loves us unconditionally and follows us unfailingly: all this is a cause of deep joy which the ups and downs of daily life cannot touch.

Gaudete in Domino semper. Rejoice in the Lord always...the Lord is near!

Fr Paul