

Archbishop Lori's Homily: Gaudete Sunday 2017

Gaudete Sunday

Holy Korean Martyrs

Woodlawn, Maryland

December 17, 2017

Dear brothers and sisters, as you have already heard, today is Gaudete Sunday, and, as you know, the Latin word “Gaudete” means “Rejoice!” Indeed, this Sunday’s liturgy is all about rejoicing for as St. Paul says in his Letter to the Philippians, “Rejoice in the Lord always, again, I say, rejoice. Indeed, the Lord is near” (4:4-5). And in today’s reading from his 2nd Letter to the Thessalonians, St. Paul again says, “Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. In all circumstances give thanks” (5:17).

One of the reasons for my joy this morning is the opportunity to visit Holy Korean Martyrs Parish, to thank you for your steadfast faith, to thank you for your love of your parish, your strong family values, and your determination to pass your faith on to the next generations, as well as for your generosity to the wider Church in Baltimore and beyond. For all of this and much more, I rejoice and give thanks! With all of you, I also rejoice in the opportunity to join you in offering our thanks to your Pastor, Fr. Joseph Kim, for his dedicated priestly service and for his wise and loving leadership of your parish. Thank you, Fr. Kim! I also look forward to my continued discussions with your parish leadership as you make plans for the future of this parish and the fulfillment of its mission. It is my intention to meet with your leadership early in the New Year to discuss the best way of moving ahead as we look towards the future.

Even as we rejoice to be together, I want to assure you also of my prayers for the maintenance of peace on the Korean Peninsula. With you, I pray for the safety of your families still in Korea and I pray that the leaders of nations will exercise restraint in what they say and do. May dialogue replace threats of war and destruction. May the violence of war be replaced by a just and lasting peace.

In only eight days, we will celebrate the Feast of Christmas. On this Gaudete Sunday, the Church helps us to get ready to welcome anew the Prince of Peace in our violence-torn world, in our badly divided culture, and into our own lives wounded by sin. The joy which the Church proclaims on this Sunday does not ignore threats of destruction nor any other form of human suffering and sinfulness. No, the Church which labors in every part of the world, knows well how much the human family suffers and how prone it is to stray from the Lord's truth and loving compassion.

So, our joy is not escapism, a temporary break from our worries and sorrows. Rather, we rejoice because the Lord is near, the Lord who enables us to address the root causes of what brings so much sadness into the lives of so many people. Let us turn to the Scriptures to see what a difference it makes when we welcome the Lord in our hearts, our homes, and our world, beginning with the prophet Isaiah.

The joyous reading from Isaiah the prophet comes to us from the dark days when the people of Israel were returning from the Babylonian exile to their homeland, and in particular, to Jerusalem. They found their former cities and countryside in desolation – everything lay in ruins. For a people who were sad, who wondered if God's promises to them were an illusion, Isaiah was a messenger of joy, hope, and healing. His words gave them fresh hope, courage and joy.

His words should also give us new hope, courage, and joy. For we, like the people of Israel, often find ourselves poor, brokenhearted, imprisoned, and held captive: we are impoverished in our inward emptiness and loneliness; we are brokenhearted by our fractured relationships; we are imprisoned by our own self-centeredness; we are held captive by our sins. For us Isaiah is also a messenger of joy, hope, and healing. For Isaiah tells us that God is working in our souls, transforming us from inside out, just as 'the earth brings forth plants' and 'the garden makes its growth spring up.' The Lord is not distant but near to us, at work in our hearts through the Holy Spirit. Thus, we are able to say with the Blessed Virgin Mary, "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!" (Lk. 1; Is. 61; Responsorial)

Paul takes this a step further in today's second reading. He urges us to have an

enduring joy, a joy that lasts, no matter what we're going through, no matter what our circumstances may be. Listen again to his words: "Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. In all circumstances give thanks...." St. Paul is telling us that joy is not merely a feeling that comes over us at Christmas. Rather, he is speaking of a joy that should be a permanent part of our lives, thanks to the action of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We experience joy when we turn from evil and repent of our sins. St. Paul teaches that joy is found when we open our hearts to the God of Peace, when we give the Holy Spirit the opportunity to work in us and through us. Indeed, if we would have deep and lasting joy, we can hold no aspect of our lives from the action of the Holy Spirit. Rather, we must actively entrust ourselves to the God of Peace who will transform every facet of our lives - our bodies, minds, hearts, our souls. If joy is lacking, we need to ask what it is we are withholding from the Holy Spirit. If joy would be complete, we must give everything to the Lord of life and love.

Isaiah has spoken to us of joy in our brokenness, St. Paul has urged us to open our inmost hearts to the Spirit, and now, in the Gospel, the figure of St. John the Baptist blazes forth. For the entirety of John's life is dedicated to announcing the coming of the Messiah. Living austere, denying himself the comforts of life, He is "the voice crying out in the desert, make straight the way of the Lord" (Jn. 1:25). John the Baptist testifies the coming of Jesus, the light of the world, the One who is utterly worthy and deserving of all our love.

Just as Isaiah speaks to us in our poverty and brokenness, so too John the Baptist cries out to get our attention, to awaken our interest, to unsettle us in our complacency, to open our eyes to the true meaning of Christmas, to jolt us amid our busyness and concerns to put God and the things of God at the center of our lives, not their peripheries. This is a profound and difficult message for us to hear and heed yet, if in God's grace we do manage to accept John's testimony, then our joy will only grow more pure, more profound, more enduring. For the more space we clear in our hearts for the presence of God, the more we empty our hearts of sins and the attachments of sin, the more we too will be able to bear witness to the coming of the Lord in our midst; the more our lives will have that critical difference that says, "The Lord is near!"

Thus do we experience what Pope Francis calls, 'the delightful and comforting joy of

evangelizing'... the joy of sharing the Good News of the Lord's nearness with our families, our friends, our colleagues.

May you indeed rejoice in the Lord - at Christmas and throughout the year - and may God bless you and keep you always in his love! St. Andrew Kim and all the Holy Martyrs of Korea, pray for us!