

IN TODAY'S READINGS, ST. PAUL PRESENTS JOY, CONSTANT JOY, AS NOT JUST A GOOD THING, BUT AS A DUTY FOR US AS CHRISTIANS. AND ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST IN LUKE'S GOSPEL SHOWS EACH OF US HOW TO ACHIEVE A JOYFUL SPIRIT.

NOW ST. PAUL ALSO TELLS US TO "REJOICE IN THE LORD ALWAYS." HE DOESN'T SAY, "REJOICE WHEN THINGS GO YOUR WAY. OR "REJOICE WHEN YOU ARE FEELING GOOD." NO, HE SIMPLY SAYS, "REJOICE ALWAYS." BEFORE DESCRIBING HOW THIS IS POSSIBLE, FIRST I WOULD LIKE TO SUGGEST WHY IT IS NECESSARY FOR A CHRISTIAN TO ALWAYS REJOICE. ST. PAUL HIMSELF GIVES THE REASON IN THE SECOND SENTENCE OF TODAY'S READING: "LET YOUR GENTLENESS BE KNOWN TO EVERYONE." INNER JOY LEADS TO GENTLENESS, TO BEING KIND TO OTHERS. THE PERSON WHO GOES AROUND SULLEN, ANGRY AND BITTER HAS A HARD TIME TREATING OTHERS WITH KINDNESS. ON THE CONTRARY, THE ANGRY PERSON OFTEN TREATS OTHERS HARSHLY. SO, ST. PAUL PRESENTS JOY, CONSTANT JOY, AS NOT JUST A GOOD THING, BUT AS A DUTY.

TODAY'S GOSPEL PASSAGE OUTLINES THE WAY TO ACHIEVE THIS JOY. REMEMBER, THE PEOPLE ASKED JOHN WHEN HE PREACHED THE BAPTISM OF REPENTANCE, "WHAT SHOULD WE DO?" JOHN GIVES THEM SOME SURPRISING ADVICE. WE MIGHT EXPECT THAT HE WOULD TELL PEOPLE TO PUT ON SACK CLOTH AND JOIN HIM IN THE DESERT FOR A DINNER OF LOCUSTS AND WILD HONEY. BUT HE DOESN'T. HE GIVES THEM VERY ORDINARY ADVICE: FIRST OF ALL, SHARE WITH THE PERSON WHO HAS LESS, AND SECOND DON'T CHEAT OTHERS, THAT IS TELL THE TRUTH AND BE HONEST IN ALL YOUR DEALINGS WITH OTHERS. AND LAST, BUT NOT LEAST, FIND SATISFACTION IN WHAT YOU HAVE. NOW THAT IS A DIFFICULT ONE FOR OUR GENERATION, I THINK YOU'LL AGREE. THE STANDARD NOW SEEMS TO BE MORE IS

BETTER.

BUT WE COULD GET THE SAME ADVICE FROM OTHER FAMOUS TEACHERS - FROM THE BUDDHA - FROM SOCRATES - FROM LAO TSE, THE CHINESE PHILOSOPHER, OR ANY GOOD TEACHER. YOU SEE, JOHN IS NOT INVENTING NEW MORAL TRUTHS. HE SPEAKS FROM THE UNIVERSAL MORAL LAW - "A LAW WRITTEN IN EVERY HUMAN HEART." ALL OF US KNOW THE MORAL LAW BECAUSE OF OUR "CONSCIENCE." THE CATECHISM OF OUR CATHOLIC CHURCH GIVES THIS DESCRIPTION OF CONSCIENCE:

"DEEP WITHIN HIS OR HER CONSCIENCE A PERSON DISCOVERS A LAW WHICH HAS NOT BEEN LAID UPON US, BUT WHICH MUST BE OBEYED. ITS VOICE, EVER CALLING US TO LOVE AND TO DO WHAT IS GOOD AND TO AVOID EVIL, SOUNDS IN OUR HEART AT THE RIGHT MOMENT... FOR EACH OF US HAS IN OUR HEART A LAW INSCRIBED BY GOD WHOSE VOICE ECHOES IN ITS DEPTHS." (1776)

THE FIRST STEP TO JOY, TO LIVING WITH A JOYFUL SPIRIT, IS TO OBEY ONE'S CONSCIENCE - THE LAW THAT GOD HAS WRITTEN ON EACH OF OUR HEARTS. WE USUALLY ONLY NEED TO BE REMINDED, AS JOHN DOES TODAY. THE FOUNDATION OF TRUE JOY IS THERE. A TROUBLED CONSCIENCE, WITH SELF-DECEPTION OR DECEPTION OF OTHERS DESTROYS PEACE OF MIND. OBEDIENCE TO CONSCIENCE, TO GOD'S MORAL LAW, BRINGS TRANQUILITY AND JOY.

SO, A PEACEFUL CONSCIENCE IS THE FIRST AND FUNDAMENTAL STEP TO JOY. THE SECOND STEP FOLLOWS NATURALLY. IT INVOLVES AS ST. JOHN SHOWS US, FINDING ONE'S PLACE IN THE ORDER OF THINGS. GOD HAS GIVEN EACH OF US GIFTS AND TALENTS TO USE IN LOVING SERVICE OF OTHERS. WE CAN'T ACHIEVE TRUE JOY WITHOUT FINDING WAYS TO OFFER THOSE GIFTS TO GOD IN LOVING SERVICE.

MATT KELLY, IN ONE OF HIS MISSIONS PUT IT THIS WAY. "WHAT DOES GOD WANT? GOD WANTS YOU TO BECOME THE BEST POSSIBLE VERSION OF YOURSELF, HE ANSWERS. AND, THE KEY, HE SAYS, IS TO LOOK AROUND YOU AND TO ASK GOD IN

YOUR PRAYER, HOW CAN I HELP? THEN, WHATEVER IS BUBBLING UP INSIDE YOU - LISTEN TO THAT.” JOHN ACKNOWLEDGED THAT SOMEONE GREATER THAN HIMSELF WAS COMING BUT THIS DIDN’T STOP HIM FROM DOING HIS PART.

THE SECOND STEP IS NOTHING MORE NOR LESS THAN FINDING OUR PLACE AND HUMBLY SERVING GOD AND OTHERS.

THE THIRD STEP IN ACHIEVING A JOYFUL SPIRIT IS THE MOST DIFFICULT FOR MANY OF US - ME INCLUDED: PATIENCE. JOHN THE BAPTIST IS THE GREAT TEACHER OF PATIENCE. HIS ENTIRE MINISTRY WAS ONE OF PATIENTLY WAITING. HE AWAITED THE MESSIAH. HE KNEW IN SPITE OF ALL HIS EFFORTS HE COULDN’T CONSTRUCT A PARADISE HERE ON EARTH - SOLVE ALL THE WORLD’S PROBLEMS. LASTING HAPPINESS CAN ONLY COME FROM GOD. YOU AND I SPEND SO MUCH TIME TRYING, TRYING TO CREATE OUR OWN HAPPINESS AND, AT THIS TIME OF YEAR, DOING EVERYTHING WE CAN TO CREATE HAPPINESS IN OUR FAMILIES. JOHN TEACHES THAT HAPPINESS IS FLEETING. JOY, PERFECT HAPPINESS, IS WORTH WAITING FOR AND TRUE JOY COMES FROM PATIENTLY WAITING FOR THE LORD.

WE ARE CALLED TO BE PATIENT WITH CHILDREN, ESPECIALLY THIS TIME OF YEAR WHEN THEY ARE SO EXCITED AND TO BE PATIENT WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS, TO CONSIDER THE STRESS OF THE SEASON AND BE MORE PATIENT. AND, FINALLY, TO BE PATIENT WITH OURSELVES AS WELL.

SO, AS WE PREPARE TO CELEBRATE THIS CHRISTMAS SEASON, PERHAPS WE MIGHT ASK OURSELVES HOW WE ARE DOING IN OUR DUTY TO BE A JOYFUL PEOPLE. IF JOY IS INDEED A CHRISTIAN DUTY, IF IT ENABLES US TO TREAT OTHERS AS WE SHOULD ALL YEAR, GENTLY, WITH DEEP KINDNESS -

AM I STRIVING FOR JOY IN THE RIGHT WAY: BY A GOOD CONSCIENCE, BY HUMBLE SERVICE AND BY PATIENCE WITH MYSELF AND WITH OTHERS?

DOES MY JOY SHOW IN THE KINDNESS THAT I SHOW TO OTHERS, NOT JUST

ISOLATED ACTS, BUT A CONSTANT, DEEP-ROOTED DAILY PRACTICE? EVEN WITH MY FAMILY - EVEN WHEN NO ONE ELSE IS LOOKING?

NOW, BEFORE YOU SAY THAT THIS IS JUST SEEING THE WORLD THROUGH ROSE-COLORED GLASSES. I KNOW THAT THE CHRISTMAS SEASON ISN'T JOYFUL FOR EVERYONE. WE ALL KNOW THAT. SO, IF THIS CHRISTIAN DUTY SEEMS IMPOSSIBLE AT TIMES, IF OUR CYNICAL ATTITUDE OR THE HARDSHIPS OF LIFE GET THE BEST OF US, WE HAVE ONE OF THE MOST HOPEFUL QUOTATIONS IN ALL OF SCRIPTURE. CHAPTER 4 OF PAUL'S LETTER TO THE PHILIPPIANS IS THERE TO INSPIRE US. ST. PAUL TELLS US THE WONDERFUL LIFE IMPLICATIONS OF TRUST IN THE LORD'S PRESENCE AT EVERY MOMENT, TO PROVIDE STRENGTH IN ALL THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF OUR LIVES. "REJOICE ALWAYS," HE SAYS. "PRAY WITHOUT CEASING. IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES GIVE THANKS... THEN THE PEACE OF GOD WHICH SURPASSES ALL UNDERSTANDING WILL GUARD YOUR HEARTS AND MINDS IN CHRIST JESUS."