

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent (C)

16<sup>th</sup> December 2018

‘Scripture III: Epistles’

*Zeph 3: shout for joy, daughter of Zion!*

*Is 12: sing and shout for joy for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel!*

*Phil 4: Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice!*

*Lk 3: 10–18: A feeling of expectancy had grown among the people ...*

Our Advent reflections on Scripture — the Word of God in the Holy Bible, and its proclamation in the Liturgy of the Word at Mass — mean that today I want to think about the 3<sup>rd</sup> of the 4 elements of Scripture that we hear at Mass. So far, we’ve thought briefly about the Old Testament ‘1<sup>st</sup>’ reading, then the response we make in the Psalm; now we come to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Reading, and next week the Gospels.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Reading at Mass comes always from the ‘Letters,’ sometimes referred to as ‘Epistles.’ These are writings of our Christian leaders — apostles and others — from the first generation of the Church. For the most part they are indeed letters — communications sent to specific communities of the early Church in the places where they were founded in the first decades after Our Lord’s Ministry, Death and Resurrection. Sometimes they deal with the broad sweep, the message of the Gospel ... other times they deal with specifics, answering questions, addressing key

points of relevance to the community at that precise time. Their importance comes from the fact that they are in fact the earliest writings of the New Testament: although in the Bible they are printed after the Gospels, they do indeed date, most of them, from *before* the Gospels were written. Over a third of the NT is take up by the Letters, and the vast majority of them were written by St Paul, though there are shorter ones by St Peter, St John, St James, and St Jude, and one, ‘The Letter to the Hebrews’ of which we don’t know the author. Of course there would have been far more letters written by St Paul and various other apostles, but the ones in the NT are the ones that survived and were deemed by the Church in the 2<sup>nd</sup> c. worthy to have included in the Sacred Scripture. There are 13 Letters by St Paul in the NT, typically taking up almost 100 pp., and bizarrely are printed in a typical Bible in the order of longest first! — so, starting with Romans, with its 16 chapters, and then 1Cor and 2Cor. The titles of the Letters of St Paul are the communities, or persons, to whom they were originally addressed: so, to the Church in Rome (Italy), Corinth, Philippi (Greece), Ephesus

(Turkey) etc., or to his collaborators in the missions, Timothy, Titus, Philemon. And they are, to say the least, impassioned! Paul does not hold back; he is fired up with the Gospel, fearless and urgent in his message of preaching Jesus to the world. This is especially true because, as we hear several times in his writings, he had originally been a zealous persecutor of Jesus's followers, and had put St Stephen and others to death prior to his dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus. From its most bitter enemy, Paul became its most eloquent and tireless missionary, and much of this wisdom and energy he translates into words of theology and pastoral wisdom in his letters.

Every Sunday, then, we have a passage from one of the Letters, and of course that means predominantly St Paul. His words are timeless, as he reflects on the graces, the joys, and also the sufferings, of what it means to be a truly committed follower of Christ. He certainly couldn't be accused of half measures! His words to us are bold and true, and reach out across the centuries since the 50s and 60s of the 1<sup>st</sup> c., when he dictated these letters to be sent to

the communities he had founded and whom he loved and cared for so deeply. His powerful words are used at funerals, too, and at weddings, and at all manner of Christian gatherings ... for they speak of 100% commitment to the Gospel, and to the joy of discipleship.

Today's 2<sup>nd</sup> Reading is typical in its liveliness and urgency, as Paul gives free rein to his delight in his community in Philippi. "*Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say Rejoice! ... the Lord is very near.*" It's from these very words, "Rejoice," that this *Gaudete*, mid-Sunday of Advent, takes its name. We draw from St Paul so much of the transmission of our Faith — we could hardly imagine Christianity without his influence and his words. So, as we draw nearer to Christmas let's indeed 'rejoice,' deeply, to know that the Lord has come near. St Paul communicates to us what he himself experienced: that the Lord was merciful, drew him back from his sins and errors, and set him on the path to salvation. "There is no need to worry," says St Paul; "ask in prayer and thanksgiving," to receive "that peace of God which surpasses all understanding."