

Joy

4th Sunday of Advent

Mi:5:1-4a; Heb 10:5-10; Lk 1:39-45

For most of us this is a very happy time of year. It is a little stressful, a little hurried and for some of us it can even be a sad or depressing time. But for the most part it is a happy time. Even though we try to remind ourselves it's Advent and that Christmas will come in due time, the world tells us it's Christmas time and being human we get caught up in the excitement and the joy of the season.

But what makes us so happy? What makes these weeks of December different than say ... February, or April, or July? Is it the songs and the carols, the presents and gifts both given and received, the trees, the decorations? Maybe it's the cards, the parties, the meals, the special gatherings? It may be some of these or it may be all of these. But let's look at Christmas in a pretend way. What if we had Christmas and we had no Christmas trees – we just didn't use a decorated evergreen tree? What could Christmas be like? What about no decorations? No lights or wreaths, or ornaments or special candles or nativities or snowmen – nothing. We just let nature decorate our landscapes – hopefully with a little snow. Now what would be Christmas be like? It would be different, but still a big holiday.

Now let's take away the cards and the carols, songs and music and also the gatherings, parties, the Christmas programs. Christmas is very different now – maybe a little unrecognizable – you may be even saying it's just not Christmas. But yes there is one thing left –the presents, the gifts. Now let's take THAT away from our Christmas image, including Santa Claus, the reindeer and the elves. I know, the children and retailers are shuddering in fear right now. Remember, though, this is make believe. But what would Christmas be like without all the Christmas stuff. Kind of sounds like February, April or July – nothing special. No this homily is not about the Grinch or Whoville, but there may be some similarities.

But wait, it's the birth of Jesus and all that other stuff is secondary to the birth of Jesus. But Jesus was already born – so Christmas is just a commemorative event? So if we peel all the Christmas stuff away – what is left? Well WE are left and JESUS is left. Since Jesus was born, died and rose he has promised to stay with us always and he is – Christmas season or not.

The image I portray is one of Joy; the kind of joy that we find in the Gospel today when Martha's baby, St. John the Baptist, leaped for joy upon hearing Mary. Joy? Now, you may be thinking I have done more to our pretend Christmas image that I portrayed to remove more joy than Ebenezer Scrooge did. But to understand today's Gospel joy and ultimately what joy really is, we have to peel away the "stuff of Christmas".

That little three letter word JOY is very powerful. We strive to be happy to be full of joy in our lives and in those we love. This word has a powerful spiritual message and guide for us as well. The J in joy can stand for Jesus. The Y in joy can stand for you. Isn't that how life is with Christ – living together very close in total happiness. But what about the O. What's the O for? The O is the other stuff - life. The O is the way we live to make the J and the Y come together for form JOY, or it could be what we don't do that makes joy not happen. It's this O that is so

very important to understand and develop. The joy of Christmas cannot come until we know how to develop the O, something that is done in Advent.

Yes the items of Christmas we peeled away are part of this puzzle – are part of the O, spiritual or secular - they bring us happiness but do they bring us closer to Jesus? The external stuff may bring us short term fleeting happiness, but these other things, the spiritual O things, that bring Jesus, our J to us the Y, ever closer and in doing so our happiness, making our joy stronger and more powerful and more satisfying. The joy we truly experience, not any shallow joy, but the true inner joy is the same joy that carries our Christmas into February, and April and July and all the other times of the year. How do we get a complete O? Well we can start with the O antiphons. Our church has sung the O antiphons since the 8th century. They use ancient imagery to proclaim the coming of Christ and fulfill not only Old Testament promises, but the present ones as well. They started on December 17 and conclude on December 23

O Wisdom of our God Most high, guiding creation with power and love, come to teach a path of knowledge

O leader of the house of Israel, giver of the law of Moses on Sinai, come to rescue us with your mighty power

O Root of Jesse's stem, sign of God's love for all his people, come to save us without delay

O key of David, opening the gate of God's eternal kingdom, come and free the prisoners of darkness

O Radiant Dawn, splendor of eternal light, sun of justice, come and shine on those who dwell in darkness and in the shadow of death

O king of all nations and keystone of the Church, come and save man whom you formed from dust!

O Emmanuel, our King and Giver of Law, come to save us Lord our God!

Feed the hungry, help the poor, be a peacemaker, love those around you, be forgiving. Doing all the things we are called to do through our Baptism. This is why we have Advent – the time before Christmas, the time to reflect on the Y and the J and determine what best O to add so that we not only maintain our joy, but make it new and exciting. This is what Jesus calls us to as he says elsewhere in the gospels the night before he died: “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy might be complete”.

The deepness of our O's, will depend on each of us. We must look at where we are in Jesus and where Jesus is in us. A well defined J and a well defined Y will together, help find the strong O. But we know we must find it to be truly happy – to not have just a seasonal happiness, a seasonal joy. For a Christmas without Jesus truly in our hearts is not Joy – no it's OY, it's nothing. A Christmas celebrated where we only go through the motions, a Christmas that gives Jesus his do and no more, a secular Christmas that focuses on the commemorative event - that has no heart, removing the true you created by God in His image, is also not joy – no it's JO. Again – nothing.

We must spend these precious moments the rest of this short Advent season finding the O's - the other things that will be meaningful to us and meaningful to Jesus; a way of bringing the J and Y together – making our happiness whole, making it real. This is the kind of joy that sustains and

grows in us throughout the year until next year when like the previous Christmas, we want more, more joy, more Jesus in our lives.

In a short time, Christmas will come, whether we are ready or not. On the night of angels as we celebrate our Lord in our lives, we will sing out in praise. But will our song be OY to the world, or JO to the world – or will it be Joy to the World, a gift we give to Jesus – our J, a gift he give to us – our Y, and a gift we give to each other – our O. All so that our joy, our happiness might be complete.

Deacon Tom Sheehan

St. Richard Parish

12-22-24