



Clifton Parish Churches
Small Group Resources
Advent 2021

Week Three

Readings

The lectionary readings for the Third Sunday of Advent are:

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Isaiah 12:2-6 *or* Psalm 146:4-10

Philippians 4:4-7

Luke 3:7-18

You might like to read the whole of the book of Zephaniah together as a group (or in advance of your time together). It's only three chapters long and none of those chapters are particularly lengthy.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice!

The third Sunday of Advent is known as Gaudete Sunday (from the Latin word *Gaudete*, meaning ‘rejoice’). Gaudete Sunday is a moment of joy in a season which has something of a penitential feel about it (albeit, as noted in Week One, not to the same extent as Lent). Pope Francis noted that Gaudete Sunday is a time to rejoice in what you have, rather than to lament what you don’t have, and that is perhaps a good reminder for us as the busyness of Advent and the rapid approach of Christmas gathers pace. What presents have we already bought? What presents do we still need to buy? How many are coming for Christmas dinner? When should we buy the turkey? Are the Christmas tree lights all working? How will I get all my work done so I can actually enjoy some rest over Christmas? How awkward will the office Christmas party be – will there even be an office Christmas party..? These and countless other questions can crowd our minds; for many, this time of year can lead to levels of anxiety that can threaten to overwhelm. We can spend so much time worrying about what we don’t have/haven’t done, that a day set aside to remind us to rejoice can be a very helpful moment of pause.

But if we find it difficult to rejoice in the midst of anxiety or busyness, what then are we to do? Our reading from Philippians gives us something of the answer. “The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in

everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” There is something about nearness to God in prayer that can still our hearts and quiet our troubles. I would want to add to Paul’s exhortation though; when we pray, we must make room simply to rest in God’s presence and listen for God’s voice. This stillness in prayer brings us very close to meditation, and can lead us to discover afresh that God is very close to us, no matter how anxious or busy we may be.

Gaudete Sunday is also the moment in Advent when we begin to turn our thoughts to the Incarnation – to celebrating Christ’s first coming among us. Although this isn’t a theme that the lectionary readings really bring out, we see hints of it in our reading from Zephaniah, with its talk of the Lord being in our midst. From this moment of Advent onwards, we begin to turn our attention to telling again the story of Christ’s birth. As we participate in the great drama of the Church’s year, so we turn our expectation to the birth of a baby, with the voices of the prophets on our heads but not knowing – yet – what exactly the birth of this baby will mean for all of humankind. It is only in continued participation in the Church’s year that we will take part in telling again the rest of the story as it unfolds; an ancient story but forever new.

Some Questions

- 1) In the material for Week One, there was a question about carving out time during Advent to pause and prepare. Have you been able to do this? What has helped you do this? What has hindered you?
- 2) The third Sunday of Advent calls us to rejoice. Do you find it easy to rejoice at this time of year? Why do you think this is?
- 3) St. Paul exhorts us not to worry because the Lord is near, but rather to pray in all things. What has been your experience of meditative prayer? What value have you found in it? How might it benefit our churches if we were to learn to pray meditatively together?
- 4) The Church's year is designed to tell us a little bit of the story of Christ, a little bit at a time. How easy do you find it to enter into the Church's year, to partake in the drama? To suspend knowledge of what lies ahead in order to experience the drama more fully? Is there anything that might help you do this?
- 5) Gaudete Sunday is a day for rejoicing and in this season we sing 'joy to the world.' In what ways might we bring joy to the world, as individuals, as a small group, as a church?