

St Mary Magdalen, Oxford
Gaudete Sunday 11th December 2005

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The one who calls you is faithful.

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I ought to be feeling very much 'in the pink' today. I ought to feel in the pink because it happens to be my birthday. I would have been literally in the pink had Mary Mags owned a complete set of vestments appropriate for the third Sunday in Advent – Gaudete Sunday – for the liturgical colour for this day ought to be rose.

Gaudete – Rejoice! Rejoice in the Lord, always, and again I say rejoice! Today is a moment of joyful, unexpected, rose-tinted irruption in the midst of the penitential purple of Advent.

Now, perhaps the liturgical aficionados among you will assist me with the meaning of this liturgical colour. But let's be quite clear, we're not really talking about pink in the sense of Barbara Cartland pink or baby-powder pink. This is a more subtle, dignified, and suggestive hue: rose, which is to say, a dusky and elegant pink: dull red mingled with white and a little grey. And the best justification I've heard is that it is the colour the sky turns just before the utter black of night is broken up by dawn. When you see the rose you know that the dead of night is passing away. Just as when you see the first of the rose-tinted blossom you know that the dead of winter is passing away.

Today, in the midst of Advent, the Church glances forward to what is going to happen at the end of Advent. God is going to give Himself to us forever – and with that thought, a mood of gaudete surges in our viscera this morning.

Beneath all deadness; beneath the harshness of winter; beneath the deadness of our minds and hearts; beneath the desolate history of mankind; beneath the severe themes of Advent lives the dearest freshness deep down things which at the rose brink eastward, springs.

But there's nothing like a birthday to spoil the mood. A birthday forces you to take stock. It makes me think of a young man with whom I have an intimate but turbulent relationship who by the time he was thirty-something had affected nothing less than the salvation of the cosmos. I, at thirty-something, have a far less impressive C.V.

Much in the manner of that famous sermon given by Alan Bennett, a birthday puts one in the mind of a question: 'Hey Jack, where do you think you are going?'

But then, there's another thirty-something with whom to share some sort of affinity today and that is the one whom the Church has oddly chosen to link with Gaudete Sunday: John the Baptist.

In St John's narrative he is less the hairy, camel-skin-clad, locust-eating vagrant of Mark. Indeed, you'll see many a Renaissance painter dress him in rose-coloured silk, the vestments in which, we may assume, he now exalts before his cousin and King.

'Who are you?' they ask him. 'What do you say about yourself? Let's see your C.V. Are you the Messiah, the Christ? But he tells them, No. Are you the prophet Elijah returned to earth? No. Are you then that figure called The Prophet? No. Then who the heck are you? We can't go back and say nothing.

And John replies: I am nothing, nothing at all. There's someone coming whose sandal I am not fit to fasten. But I am just a nothing: a nothing who knows what's on the way!

John knows exactly what he is and what he is not. He knows that he is a necessary part of God's unfolding plan; the first actor on the stage; the narrator, the harbinger, the voice crying in the wilderness who sets the scene, and lets us know what is to come.

And so that is why John the Baptist is such an appropriate hero for today, for although the life of this ranting hermit was bizarre, and defeated, and peripheral, John knew all along that God was about to break into the world.

Advent is a cold coming but today we glimpse the rose shades of the new dawn and hear its call and, as Paul reminds us, the One who calls is faithful.

Those words will have a particular resonance for me and the deacon and sub-deacon today for those words, in Greek, were inscribed on the college bell at our theological college. There on the bell was: πιστος ὁ κων – 'He who calls is faithful.' When you heard the bell at 7.35 a.m., you were very probably still in bed. It meant you had 5 minutes to throw on some clothes and get down to chapel for Morning Prayer.

Having been 'faithfully called' by the bell, what met you in the chapel – the only image on the east wall – was a small icon of Christ holding open the Scriptures at the words: 'You did not choose me, but I chose you.'

Those two passages of Scripture punctuated every day of our priestly formation. They were a sober – and ultimately liberating – reminder that discerning our calling – our vocation – was not an exercise in finding our niche in life. It was actually about shedding the unreality which suffocates the very life of our soul. It was about making the decision to be what I am, to answer God's Word. It's what's left when all our games have stopped.

How silly we are to speak of vocation as though it were a synonym for gainful employment. And dear old John the Baptist, pretty in pink, shows us just how silly:

John is hugely content to be where he is and what he is. Any part in God's coming is vital. His call was to the Kingdom Movement. Jesus' call for us is not to go into the carpentry and cabinet making business, but into the Revolution. Our vocation is that we have been chosen by the One who is faithful. He has called us by name – our one true name as sons and daughters of the Most High.

And, of course, John never really got beyond Advent; he never had much to do with God Incarnate as Christ. But he felt the Incarnation on the way, shaking beneath his feet. John's mood, therefore, was an excited, expectant, rose-tinted mood, the mood we associate with today.

When I hear John the Baptist, I think of Gwendolyn Fairfax – as I'm sure you do too. Gwendolyn Fairfax waiting for Jack Worthing to find Miss Prism's famous leather handbag, when she suddenly exclaims, "This suspense is terrible. I hope it will last."

Such is the mood of Gaudete Sunday. Gaudete is a bidding to the joy of anticipation, it is the joy of eating one's cake and having it, too.

But the joy of anticipation has been lost to us in the modern Western world, with our excesses of consumer gluttony, and we are given over instead to apprehension, the dread of impending disaster.

But today, beneath the seriousness of Advent runs this intense spirit of gaudete. We stand forever on the eve of God's coming and the suspense is terrible. But our waiting is shot through with a thread of rose-coloured silk, a mood of exultant light-heartedness breaking forth in the middle of winter.

Rejoice in the Lord alway; and again I say, Rejoice!

To Whom, therefore, Father, Son and Holy Ghost, ever One God, be honour and glory, now, and in the ages of ages:

Amen.