

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O lord, my strength and my redeemer.

“Rejoice greatly! Shout aloud!” says Zechariah. Do you feel like rejoicing today? Do you feel like going in the streets and shout for joy to the Lord? I’m sure that many of us don’t feel like today is a time for rejoicing. We live in a strange time where the pandemic of Covid-19 destroyed most of what was our “normal” life. We live in a time where people are losing patience with each other, where mask-wearing people are aggressive toward people without masks, and vice-versa. And I don’t talk about violence, protests, social and racial injustices, and the anxiety of so many who have lost their jobs and don’t know how to put bread on the table. It looks almost crazy in this strange scary time to call for rejoicing, when so many of us are living with fear, anxiety and anger.

However, it’s good for us to listen to this call for joy. When I read the readings for today, I felt this deep invitation to rejoice. We are invited to rejoice because our God is a loving God. We are invited to rejoice because our Savior is a humble savior bringing peace and reconciliation. We are invited to rejoice because our God “is gracious and full of compassion”; because our Lord is “slow to anger and of great kindness.” We are invited to rejoice because our God is “loving to everyone, and his compassion is all over his works.” Zechariah and the psalmist invite us to rejoice not because of what we possess, not because of what we have done, not because of who we are, not because we have a wonderful life without any problem... but because of who God is: loving, patient, forgiving... simply because God is God and we are part of God’s people. We are invited to rejoice in God, even if we are not perfect, even if we are confronted with unbearable difficulties and fears in our lives. Let us rejoice greatly because God is a loving God who cares for us.

You might think: Pierre-Henry is crazy, there is no way I can rejoice in our current context. Actually, we can. It’s a choice we can make, if we are looking in the right direction, or more accurately, if we are looking at the right person. In March 2011, I had the privilege to spend a week in Haiti with a small group of parishioners to visit our sister parish and school there. It was not long after the deadly earthquake struck the Island. I saw people living in atrocious conditions under tents. Cities and villages had been destroyed, all infrastructures needed to be rebuilt, water was polluted, electricity ran a few hours a day; families had been decimated; even children had to work to help their families. I was ready to meet people in tears, desperate people. But this is not what I saw! In spite of all the good reasons they could have had to despair, in spite of all the good reasons they could have had to revolt, I only saw joy, smiles, and laughter. Yes, there was pain. But most of the people I met were able to rejoice, and to sing to the Lord with all their hearts. When I asked a young man how it was possible for him to smile and rejoice, he simply said: “I love Jesus, and Jesus loves me. He is my savior. He is always with us.” I met people with such a deep and strong faith that they were able to rejoice despite the circumstances because they knew that they were loved by God. Isn’t that something?

Being able to rejoice, is being able to look around us and to see, in the midst of all what is going wrong, little details, tiny things, that are good, simple, beautiful, and are for us signs of God’s presence in our lives and in the world... It’s easy to say, I know. Sometimes it demands efforts; especially when we are confronted with difficulties or pain in our personal lives. But it’s a choice we can make. To use my grand-mother’s advice, we can always choose what kind of cup we want to look at: the half-empty or the half-full. The way we look at the world around us, the way we look at the reality of our lives will allow us to rejoice or to despair. Rejoicing is the way to go, a way of life.

I already shared with some of you this story that illustrates my point. In March 1968, the then young Bishop Marty became the new archbishop of Paris, France. In May began the famous 1968 “revolution.” There were a lot of

protests, riots on the streets, violence between police, students and workers. Bishop Marty tried to present all these things to God in his personal prayer. He realized pretty soon that something was wrong in his spiritual life: his prayer was only a long list of demands. He was unable to give thanks or to rejoice for one thing in the midst of such a violent and troubled world, filled with pain, difficulties, and worries. So he made a choice. He decided to note every day at least one good thing he could be thankful for in a notebook. At first it was a struggle to find something positive. After a while he was able to give thanks for many little simple facts: a smile, an impromptu visit, a word, an encounter, and many other little facts in which he was now able to see God's presence. The troubled and complicated situation was still the same, but his vision of it had been changed; then he was able to see God's presence around him. As a consequence his prayer changed too, from petition to thanksgiving, from despair to hope, from sadness to joy.

We too are invited to rejoice greatly and give thanks to God for all the good things that happen in our lives or in the world around us, to rejoice and give thanks for God's loving presence in the midst of all our problems. It's exactly what Jesus did when he suddenly stopped what he was doing and began to give thanks to his father: "I thank you Father." Jesus was well aware that his message was not well received by the religious leaders, scribes and Pharisees. He was aware that the wise and the intelligent had already rejected him. But he knew that the little ones, the humble, his disciples, those who were suffering, those who were rejected by the society, had received his message. This awareness that the humble, the poor, the needy, the little, were able to receive God's word was a great joy for Jesus.

We have at least one more reason to rejoice today: the invitation Jesus sends to everybody who is "weary" and is "carrying heavy burdens." "Come to me, and I will give you rest." For people in Jesus time it was clear that the burden came from all the laws and rules given by the scribes and Pharisees, hundreds of laws that ruled all the daily lives of devout Jews, sometimes so complicated that it was difficult to remember or to apply. "Come to me if you are weary or burdened, I will give you rest." In a spiritual reading it's easy to apply this invitation to each of us, this is an invitation to present to Jesus all of our burdens, physical, emotional, spiritual; an invitation to present all our pains and sufferings, all our problems light or heavy, because Jesus is going to give us rest. That doesn't mean that our burdens will magically disappear, that only means that despite our burdens we will find rest, peace, joy, and hope, like the Haitian brothers and sisters of my story. Isn't it a good reason to rejoice?

Surprisingly, on this weekend of Independence Day, we are invited to rejoice by taking Jesus' yoke, by becoming more dependent on Jesus. The yoke symbolizes God's law. So, we are invited to rejoice because Jesus' yoke is simple and light: it's all about love, the love of God and the love of our neighbor. This is simple but demanding to love God and to love our neighbor, but the good news, and a new cause for rejoicing, is that we don't have to bear this yoke alone. You probably know that a yoke is this strange instrument made to help bulls, or sometimes human beings, to wear bigger loads with less efforts as the load is shared by two animals. We are invited to rejoice not only because Jesus' yoke is light; not only because Jesus is gentle and humble of heart; but we are also invited to rejoice because the Lord will bear the yoke with us. He always bears the heaviest part of our burdens.

So, today, let us greatly rejoice because Jesus' yoke will bring rest for our souls. Jesus' yoke will bring to our hearts a deep and lasting peace, a strong spiritual joy, and a light that will shine even when all things around us are dark. Let us greatly rejoice because we have been loved, saved, and called by Jesus. Amen!