

Rejoice!

Lent 4/B • March 14, 2021
Church of the Ascension, Chicago
Father Patrick Raymond, Rector

Laetare Jerusalem: et conventum facite omnes qui diligitis eam:

Rejoice ye with Jerusalem: and be glad with her, all ye that love her:

- the chanted Introit for the Fourth Sunday in Lent

Laetatus sum in his quae dicta sunt mihi: in domum Domini ibimus.

I was glad when they said unto me: we will go into the house of the Lord.

- the chanted Gradual for the Fourth Sunday in Lent

All the leading priests and the people also were exceedingly unfaithful, following all the abominations of the nations; and they polluted the house of the LORD that he had consecrated in Jerusalem. - 2 Chronicles 36:14

God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ- by grace you have been saved- and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. - Ephesians 4:2-7

Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When Jesus looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world." - John 6:4-14

REJOICE! REJOICE, JERUSALEM!

The Latin word *Laetare* means rejoice and is the first word of the Introit for this morning's mass, and from it we get the traditional designation for this Fourth Sunday in Lent, *Laetare Sunday*.

REJOICE! REJOICE, JERUSALEM!

It rises like a splendid firework in the prevailing night sky of Lent. It rises brightly as encouragement, as a promise of hope. In one word it says to us: *If at this halfway point in your Lenten journey you are plagued with weariness, doubt or fear, even so, persevere. The way ahead will in fact become even darker and more difficult. But not far beyond you will see the salvation of God, and you will be blessed with renewal of spirit, and joy. Rejoice!*

Take a moment with me, if you will, if you can, to locate 'Rejoice!' within you, even if, at first, it may be faint or fleeting. *Rejoice* is rarely found here [in the head] but mostly radiates out from here [the heart]. If you can't find it there, see if you can get a jumpstart from the roses on the altar this morning, or maybe from this magnificent pink cope, We bring it out only twice a year, and I'm allowing myself, for your edification, to wear it while preaching.

Finding 'Rejoice!' anywhere may seem extra challenging in the context of our ongoing pandemic, with all of its deprivations. Whatever in the past we normally '*gave up for Lent*' may seem trivial compared to all that so many of us have given up, or done without, or lost

over the past year. Governor Pritzker's first pandemic executive orders went into effect a year ago yesterday. We were traversing Lent then as well. It may feel to many of us as if Easter never came then. Instead, Lent continued, and has continued, and continued, for a year. When and where, in the midst of all of it, have we rejoiced?

But we are not at all alone in hard times. Notice, for instance, that there's little if anything to rejoice about at the start of this morning's first lesson, from 2nd Chronicles. The author recaps 70 years of history, starting with the infidelities of God's people, giving rise to God's wrath and resulting in a mass slaughter – men, women and children; young and old – and the destruction of the first Temple in Jerusalem. And then the long, long exile in Babylon. And after all that, finally, a reason to rejoice: Along comes Cyrus, King of Persia, with an unexpected and unasked-for edict allowing restoration: Israel! Go home to Jerusalem! And when you get there, I'll even help you to rebuild God's house there.

Did you happen to follow the words of the Gradual proper chanted after that first lesson? "*I was glad when they said unto me: we will go into the house of the Lord.*" Rejoice!

Rejoicing arguably permeates today's second lesson, as we hear of "*the immeasurable riches of God's grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.*" The text begins by describing God as one "*who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses,*" and who "*made us alive together with Christ.*" Rejoice!

And then imagine the rejoicing of 5000 hungry souls as they are miraculously fed and satisfied by Jesus, an extravagant demonstration of God's mercy told in today's appointed text from the Gospel of John. Notice that Jesus does not screen the crowd for moral purity or political correctness or religious orthodoxy. *Everyone* who is hungry and who wants the bread and the fish gets the bread and the fish! If you want what Jesus has on offer, let no one stand in your way. Rejoice!

Notice as well that Jesus does not merely provide survival rations. All received '*as much as they wanted*' and they were '*were satisfied.*' The Greek word for satisfied here is also used by Mary, Mother of God, in a line from the Magnificat: *he has filled the hungry with good things.* How often do you or I feel *that* satisfied? In case you haven't recently, or ever, felt it: don't look for it here [in the head]; most often it radiates out from here [the heart]. If you can locate that blessed, God-given satisfaction within, stay with it and look around – I'm quite sure that you will also see 'rejoicing' nearby. They may in fact be dancing together.

But we humans are so often *unsatisfied*, aren't we? *Satisfied* and *unsatisfied* seem to be the theme of a story recently shared with me about the authors Kurt Vonnegut and Joseph Heller. They were party guests one night in the opulent home of a billionaire hedge fund manager. Vonnegut said to Heller that the host made more money in a day than Heller had made in all the years and best-selling sales and movie deals for his famous 1961 novel, *Catch 22*. Heller responded, "*Yes, but I have something he'll never have ... [I have] enough.*"¹

Do you know what Heller meant by *enough*? Do *you* have enough? Do you have at least an inkling of what Jesus was signifying and so freely giving to all there on that hillside as the Passover neared? Are *you* satisfied? If so, you may also recognize why, even in the midst of Lent, as our Passover nears, or even in the midst of pandemic, and loss, sorrow and fear – even in the midst of all of it, you and I are summoned, in faith, to rejoice. *Amen.*

¹ I've lost the exact source but have a photocopy of a page in a book in which the story is attributed to Vanguard Funds founder Jack Bogle (d. 2019).