

Advent 3, Year A, 2013  
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY  
The Rev. Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

This morning  
you may have noticed  
that we lit a pink candle  
instead of the usual purple one.

Today  
is traditionally known as Gaudete Sunday. The name comes from that Latin word for "Rejoice"  
which was the first word of the traditional opening sentence of the Mass.

And so, while the season of Advent was traditionally a time of repentance and serious  
preparation  
for the coming of Christ,  
this Sunday had a lighter, more celebratory feel to it.  
Hence the pink candle, and, if we had them,  
pink vestments.

And our psalm today  
is one of celebration, a psalm  
of rejoicing.

One of the comments that was made  
when I surveyed the congregation about whether I should preach on the gospels or the psalms  
in this next three year cycle,  
was that this person - and I don't know who it was -  
this person wanted to hear sermons on the psalms  
and the way in which they are quoted  
in the New Testament.

It was a great suggestion,  
because the psalms  
are kind of like the prayer book  
or hymnal  
of the people of God  
in the Old Testament.  
The book of psalms is called in Hebrew the "Tehilim", or praises;  
the word for an individual psalm is "mizmor", or song.

And so if you wanted to know how to pray,

you would turn to the psalms.  
If you gathered with other people to worship  
you would use the psalms as your prayers and songs.  
And so just as the prayers we say each week from our prayer book  
and the hymns we sing  
become fixed in our memory,  
so did the psalms.  
And just as we find ourselves quoting from them  
so did the first Christians  
as they tried to put into words  
what God's work in Christ  
was all about.  
Even Christ himself  
turned to the psalms  
to talk of his own call  
and mission.

And of course, that process hasn't stopped.  
We quote the psalms in our worship;  
our hymnal is full of hymns that draw on the words of the psalms.

And today, our psalm is one of the one  
that is echoed time and time again in the New Testament, and far beyond.

It's one of the last five psalms in the collection  
that we think of as the Book of Psalms,  
numbers 146 through 150,  
and all of them  
begin and end  
with the same word. Hallelujah!

Or in English,  
Praise the Lord!

Our lectionary  
had us begin at verse four,  
so let's hear the whole psalm,  
so we can hear our verses  
in context.

And I'm reading from a slightly different translation than we read before - that was the prayer book; this is the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, that we do all our other reading from.

Praise the Lord!  
 Praise the Lord, O my soul!  
 I will praise the Lord as long as I live;  
     I will sing praises to my God all my life long.  
 Do not put your trust in princes,  
     in mortals, in whom there is no help.  
 When their breath departs, they return to the earth;  
     on that very day their plans perish.  
 Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,  
     whose hope is in the Lord their God,  
 who made heaven and earth,  
     the sea, and all that is in them;  
 who keeps faith forever;  
     who executes justice for the oppressed;  
     who gives food to the hungry.  
 The Lord sets the prisoners free;  
     the Lord opens the eyes of the blind.  
 The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down;  
     the Lord loves the righteous.  
 The Lord watches over the strangers;  
     he upholds the orphan and the widow,  
     but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.  
 The Lord will reign forever,  
     your God, O Zion, for all generations.  
 Praise the Lord!

The whole focus of this psalm  
 is on praising God.

And it begins  
 by contrasting  
 the power that earthly rulers have  
 with the power of God.  
 No matter how powerful they think they are,  
 sooner or later they will die,  
 and no matter how great their plans were,  
 their authority  
 will pass to someone else.

But God,  
 God is the one  
 who created all things.  
 God gave this world

the very breath of life.  
God's power and authority  
will last to eternity;  
there is nothing  
that is beyond God's realm,  
nothing beyond God's influence,  
nothing beyond God's ability to act.

And so, says the psalmist,  
give thanks to God.  
Celebrate.  
Trust in him.

And not just because of what God has done in creating us,  
but what because of what God continues to do.  
Because God continues to be at work in the world.  
God continues to work  
constantly putting things right,  
bringing justice,  
healing.  
Above all  
loving us.

And it's that second part, the part about God  
putting things right  
that's the focus of the verses of the psalm  
that the lectionary had us read today.  
Not because the rest isn't important  
but because at this time of year,  
the rejoicing, the praise  
has a particular shape to it.  
We're getting close  
to the birth of our Savior,  
we're beginning to think about  
what it means  
for God to be incarnate  
in Jesus Christ,  
what it meant  
for the Messiah to come.

And you heard the echo of the psalm  
in our reading from the gospel according to St Matthew today.

“When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.””

“[The Lord] executes justice for the oppressed;”  
says the psalm.

“[The Lord] gives food to the hungry.  
The Lord sets the prisoners free;  
the Lord opens the eyes of the blind.  
The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down;  
the Lord loves the righteous.”

Jesus  
is the embodiment of the psalm.

And here in Matthew  
isn't the only place that we hear echoes of our psalm.

Remember what Jesus said  
that time  
he went into the synagogue?

[Jesus] stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.’

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’

And before that, back when Mary first knew  
she was going to bear a son,  
Emmanuel, God with us,  
and she sang in joy  
the words we know as the Magnificat,  
words which the lectionary offered as an alternative to our psalm today

‘My soul magnifies the Lord,  
 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.  
 Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;  
 for the Mighty One has done great things for me,  
 and holy is his name.  
 His mercy is for those who fear him  
 from generation to generation.  
 He has shown strength with his arm;  
 he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
 and lifted up the lowly;  
 he has filled the hungry with good things,  
 and sent the rich away empty.  
 He has helped his servant Israel,  
 in remembrance of his mercy,  
 according to the promise he made to our ancestors,  
 to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.’

Echoes upon echoes  
 throughout scripture.

And as we prepare for the coming of Christ,  
 we hear the same echoes in our own lives.  
 Because this is what God’s realm is like,  
 the kingdom that we pray will come on earth  
 every time we pray the Lord’s prayer,  
 this is where we join God  
 in working for a renewed, healed, recreated  
 world,  
 where the hungry are fed and the poor get good news,  
 where prisoners are released and the lame walk,  
 where lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear,  
 where blind see and the oppressed are free,  
 where those who are bowed down are lifted up and those have died  
 are raised to new life,  
 where the oppressed know justice  
 and the righteous know  
 the love of God.

Where we sing with joy and expectation  
 the words of Charles Wesley,

O for a thousand tongues to sing  
my dear Redeemer's praise,  
the glories of my God and King,  
the triumphs of his grace!

My gracious Master and my God,  
assist me to proclaim  
and spread through all the earth abroad  
the honors of thy Name.

Jesus! the Name that charms our fears  
and bids our sorrows cease;  
'tis music in the sinner's ears,  
'tis life and health and peace.

He speaks, and listening to his voice,  
new life the dead receive;  
the mournful broken hearts rejoice,  
the humble poor believe.

Hear him, ye deaf; his praise, ye dumb,  
your loosened tongues employ;  
ye blind, behold, your Savior come;  
and leap, ye lame, for joy!

Glory to God and praise and love  
be now and ever given  
by saints below and saints above  
the Church in earth and heaven.

Words: Charles Wesley, 1740