



**A Sermon preached in Saint John's Cathedral, Denver, Colorado  
by The Reverend Canon Andrew Van Culin, *Sub-Dean***

**The 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent: Gaudete Sunday**

**December 11, 2011**

*Our King and Savior now draws near: Come let us adore him. Amen*

*"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice."  
(Philippians 4:4-6)*

These words, from Philippians, form the beginning of an ancient introit for today's mass, and give us the name for this Sunday: *Gaudete Sunday*, that is, "Rejoice Sunday." And so we set this Sunday apart from the other 3 Sundays of Advent, each filled with their calls for repentance and penitence, to celebrate for a day. Today, we wear rose vestments and light a rose colored candle; in more ancient times, flowers might well reappear within the church, and the Organ would sing again, having been silenced for the duration of Advent.

Yet, this rejoicing and celebration bears a question: Why rejoice now? Here in the midst of our Christmas preparations – and all the stress that comes with it! – here in the midst of our preparation and repentance, why rejoice? Isn't it a bit early? In two weeks, yes, by all means, rejoice, but today? It's still Advent!

Celebration today seems a bit like the Chicago Tribune's famously premature proclamation, "Dewey Defeats Truman!", or an athlete celebrating a home run before the ball has left the park: a bit premature, to say the least. Rejoicing and celebration will come in due course, but not yet.

Yet, our ability to rejoice today, is critical to our ability to rejoice on Christmas morn. In some real way, rejoicing today is a form of preparation. In the midst of our hurried lives, made all the more chaotic each day as Christmas draws ever nearer: are the Stockings ready? Gifts bought? Cards signed and sent? Are the lights and decoration up? Wait, do we even have the wretched tree, for Pete's sake?

In the midst of all the added stress of Christmas, our ability to rejoice and celebrate now, is akin to tilling the soil of our hearts. Our ability to celebrate the in-breaking of God's love on Christmas, is presaged by our ability to celebrate – to rejoice in God – today, here and now, wherever, and whatever the state of our life and world might be. Otherwise, our Christmas celebrations will likely be little more than an exhausted sigh of relief that it is done – no more decorating, caroling, baking, or repenting – if, by "preparation", we simply mean do more, decorate differently, and focus on our brokenness.



The call to rejoice forces us to look beyond the Christmas to-do list and to look for things to celebrate. It challenges us to look into our lives, with the expectation that we will find God's gift already present – perhaps incomplete or bit roughly built, but already there. The deliberate act of rejoicing is critical step to cultivating a heart of gratitude, a heart prepared to receive God's gifts – on Christmas day, or June 18<sup>th</sup>, or December 11<sup>th</sup>.

Setting the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent apart as a day to rejoice and celebrate is a call to deliberate preparation through gratitude. By preparing our hearts with gratitude in small ways, we deepen our ability to rejoice in grand ways. To use a rather mundane example – it is hard to celebrate a life of fidelity and companionship, if we cannot appreciate and celebrate a day of fidelity and companionship now. And if all that Christmas offers is a respite from the chaos that precedes it, we will miss Christmas all together.

And so it is critical that we spend a day – an hour even – of preparation, not to do anything more, but by celebrating what already is, God's presence, God's gift and God's grace in our lives.

*"Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I say, rejoice!"*

This rejoinder, however, is more than a preparatory call. It is also, a fundamental statement of our faith. The call, and our ability, to "Rejoice in the Lord always," is a reminder that God's gift on Christmas is not simply something radically new, but rather a fulfillment of God's ancient desire and way of being amongst us. Each and every time that we rejoice in God, not just for the grandest of celebrations at Incarnation or Resurrection, but especially for the most common of occurrences – a tulip just beginning to push up through the earth, or a gently work in a difficult hour – each is a proclamation that God is active in our lives for good; that God is present and active in our lives each day.

We don't wait to celebrate God on Christmas, as if God has not been present on the days preceding. Instead, we are challenged to rejoice today, to remember today, that God is working for our redemption even now, drawing us closer to the fullness of his glory and the fullness of his love, which will be born on Christmas morn.

*"Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I say, rejoice!"*