

“The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the Gospel.”

The Joy of the Gospel

If you would, picture in your mind the rainbows you have seen. Remember one that just stopped you in your tracks, no matter what you were doing, so that you take it all in, the beauty before you that you could contemplate. How lucky we are to see it! And there is more to it than just admiring the beauty before you - the deeper meaning of this is that the rainbow is a sign of God's love for us; God's joyous love for us! We just heard that that is so in our passage from Genesis and the story of Noah. Noah and his family were experiencing a disaster, The world they knew was about to end; civilization was being destroyed and their life's journey seemed to be leading only to death. But the preparations that Noah and his family made paid off for them in that their journey was transformed from death to new life. And God sealed that new life with his covenant that made it permanent. That covenant whose sign is the rainbow maintains that God's love will prevail and nothing will ever take that love from us. This is the definition of joy, a joy that we can continue to experience if we choose to.

Pope Francis at the beginning of his papacy has given us an exhortation entitled the Joy of the Gospel. In it we exhorts us to take hold of the joy that God continues to offer us and make it visible in our lives by pursuing a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. And at the beginning of our Lenten journey, it is a timely message indeed. As in Noah's time all of us share a journey together and that is the journey of life. We are all, believers and unbelievers, on the same path and will experience the same destination which is death. When we allow ourselves to think about this very much, we get depressed. So we don't think about it and fill our life's journey with diversions; some good and some bad. But we all participate in this behavior to one extent or another. Jesus himself, being human, experienced this also; that was his desert experience; that was his suffering and passion. But his

mission is to lead us to the joy of new life, so he becomes the way, the truth and the life. We hear St. Peter again: “Christ suffered and died for our sins once that he might lead you to God. Put to death in the flesh, he was brought to life in the Spirit.” Life in the Spirit is the new destination that God provides for us. This makes life worth living.

Pope Francis gives us some thoughts to explain how we, in following Jesus, can change our final destination from death to life: “The great danger in today’s world, pervaded as it is by consumerism, is the desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart, the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures, and a blunted conscience.” As we continue this destructive path of life then: “God’s voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fades.” How true this is! All of us experience these effects at some time in our lives, maybe more than once, hopefully not all the time. Now Pope Francis gives us the antidote for a failed life; “Those who accept Jesus’ offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness.” Yes Jesus is our Antidote but more than that he is the path to new and eternal life. St. Peter tells us that by renewing our baptism we make “an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ who has gone into heaven, and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities and powers subject to him.” Thus accepting Jesus lets us tap into his power to subdue all that is negative in our lives. Pope Francis issues then this invitation: “I invite all Christians everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly every day.” A daily renewal! Lent is the perfect time to do this. “Behold, now is a very acceptable time, behold now is the day of salvation,” as we heard on Ash Wednesday. Francis says this so beautifully: “Now is the time to say to Jesus: ‘Lord, I have let myself be deceived; in a thousand ways I have shunned your love, yet here I am

once more, to renew my covenant with you. I need you. Save me once again, Lord, take me once more into your redeeming embrace.” How I need to say those words with complete trust that God will accept them as my true sacrifice and devotion to God. We must remember that God never tires of forgiving us; rather we are the ones who tire of seeking his mercy. So thanks solely to this encounter - or renewed encounter - with God’s love, which blossoms into an enriching friendship, we are liberated from our narrowness and self absorption. We are back on the track of new life.

Now, no one can strip us of the dignity bestowed upon us by this boundless and unfailing love. That’s the joy that comes to us either quietly or exuberantly. “And if we have received the love which restores meaning to our lives, how can we fail to share that love with others?” To share the love of Christ with everyone and anyone is our mission from Jesus. The unfailing love of God for us is the good news, the gospel, the evangelion. Thus our mission to be evangelists to those we encounter.

A famous evangelist was in town to hold a crusade. On the way to the church where the crusade was being held, the evangelist wanted to stop at the post office to mail a letter. But he got hopelessly lost and finally decided to ask someone for directions.

He noticed a little boy on the side walk, so he pulled over and said, “Excuse me son, but can you tell me where the post office is?” The boy said, “sure. Turn around and go back down the street to the first light, turn left and it’s s block or two on your right.”

“Thank you very much young man. By the way,” he added handing the boy the announcement for the crusade, “I’d like to invite you to come to a meeting today where I’ll tell you how you can find Jesus Christ as your personal savior.”

“Don’t think I’ll be there. You can’t even find the way to the post office”

So if we want to be Jesus for others, we have to know not only our destination but also we must know the way. The season of Lent is offered to us as a time to know better the way, to know Jesus better, and to learn to trust him and the Holy Spirit that comes from him and the Father. Pope Francis then tells us, “All of us are asked to obey Jesus’ call to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the peripheries in need of the light of the Gospel.” Love or joy not expressed in works is easily extinguished. That’s why Pope Francis wants each one of us to take a chance, get out of our comfort zone, and bring the gospel to someone who needs to hear it. If each one of us does this then our community is enriched and brought to new life. The Gospel joy which enlivens the community of disciples is a missionary joy and this joy is a sign that the Gospel has been proclaimed and is bearing fruit.

“If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith and joy to support them, without meaning and goal in life”. For me, my comfort zone is to nourish a private faith life; it is definitely not to go out and share Jesus with those who don’t want to hear it. But faith without works is dead. So I may not succeed and yet I must try. I must try at least to plant a seed. “Works of love directed to my neighbor are the most perfect manifestation of the interior grace of the Spirit.” We have the Eucharist, we have Jesus, body, soul and divinity with us. We complete our communion by sharing this Spirit. Pope Francis exhorts us: “Let us go forth, then, let us go forth to offer everyone the life of Jesus Christ!”