

**And again I say Rejoice!**  
**17 December 2017**

**John 1:6-8, 19-28**  
**Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11**

Those of you who work in Wellington will be familiar with the sight of beggars in the CBD. But those of you who both work in Wellington and travel there by train will almost certainly know one beggar in particular. A woman who can usually be found outside Wellington Railway Station, or across the road on the other side of Bunny Street, most weekday mornings.

I don't know anything about her, or what issues in her life led to her being where she is. Although the fact she is on the streets begging means she has in some way been marginalised from mainstream society and is one of the last, the lost, and the least we are called to care for.

Sometimes she is asking for money for food or travel. But often she is singing. Enthusiastically singing hymns and praise and worship songs. Her favourite seems to be 'To Get a Touch from the Lord is so Real', but, perhaps not surprisingly, she has recently been singing Christmas carols. We don't know her name, so some of my colleagues and I refer to her as 'the singing lady'.

The fact that she is simultaneously on the margins, and making a joyful public statement of her faith, at first seems somewhat incongruous in this day and age. But such apparent contradiction would not have seemed so out of place in ancient Palestine, where it would seem some degree of marginalisation was part of the badge of office of being a prophet.

Now, don't get me wrong. I am not declaring the woman who begs outside Wellington Railway Station to be a prophet. But she did come to mind while I was reflecting on today's reading from the Gospel according to St John, which spoke of another prophet who lived some 2,000 years ago.

For the second Sunday in a row, our gospel reading has focussed on St. John the Baptist. Last week's reading from the Gospel according to St Mark portrayed John as something a wild man who, "...was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey"<sup>1</sup>, and this popular image of him has endured.

John was not the sort of person you would bring home to impress your family. He gave the impression of a miserable character, certainly not one who was full of joy. Although I suspect his enthusiasm may have made up for that somewhat. But the people flocked to him, because despite his rough appearance and temperament, and the flocked to him because he brought a message of hope.

At the time, the Jews were living under the unwanted occupation of the Romans, and they were hoping for a Messiah who would free them, just like the Persian King Cyrus freed them from the Babylonians hundreds of years earlier.

In today's gospel reading, John made it quite clear to the priests and Levites who had been sent to question him that he was not the Messiah, and neither was he the prophet Elijah, who was expected to precede the Messiah. However, citing the prophet Isaiah, he did say he was the one proclaiming the coming of the Messiah. We heard a

longer section of that particular text he referred to in our Older Testament reading this morning, but I really like the way it is summarised in *A New Zealand Prayer Book*, "Jesus Christ is good news for the poor, release for the captives, recovery of sight for the blind and liberty for those who are oppressed."<sup>2</sup> And that is certainly something to celebrate.

Today is the third Sunday of Advent, also known as Gaudete Sunday. Just as Laetare Sunday in the middle of Lent is a brief respite from the austerity of the rest of the season, Gaudete Sunday suspends the penitential nature of Advent to allow us to celebrate the joy and gladness of our promised redemption, and anticipate the coming of the Lord. It is a day on which it is traditional to say, as St Paul said to the Philippians, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice."<sup>3</sup>

So what exactly makes us joyful? Material and worldly things, or the promise of things to come? Theologian Henri Nouwen has given us a useful differential between happiness, which he notes was dependent on external conditions, and joy, which he describes as, "the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing -- sickness, failure, emotional distress, oppression, war, or even death -- can take that love away."<sup>4</sup>

And I believe we can also learn from a point Pope Francis made in his Gaudete Sunday homily three years ago, when he said Gaudete Sunday was the 'Sunday of joy', and that instead of worrying about all those things we haven't yet done to prepare for Christmas, we should take time out to chill and reflect on all the good things life has given us.<sup>5</sup>

The woman I see begging at or near Wellington Railway Station most mornings almost certainly has little in the way that is material. But she has joy we could all learn from.

So, rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice!

Darryl Ward

17 December 2017

<http://theword.tk>

<sup>1</sup> Mark 1:6

<sup>2</sup> NZPB P 456

<sup>3</sup> Philippians 4:4

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/young-voices/gaudete-sunday-rejoice-despite-heartbreak-all-around-us>

<sup>5</sup> [http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2014/12/14/pope\\_celebrates\\_mass\\_for\\_gaudete\\_sunday\\_at\\_roman\\_parish/1114796](http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2014/12/14/pope_celebrates_mass_for_gaudete_sunday_at_roman_parish/1114796)