

HOMILY 3rd SUNDAY OF ADVENT 2021 YEAR C
GAUDETE SUNDAY – REJOICE IN POINTING THE WAY TO JESUS

Lk 3.1-18 Zeph 3.14-18 Phil 4.4-7

Welcome to our celebration of Eucharist for the Third Sunday of Advent, as John the Baptist continues to point the way to Jesus, fitting well the motto of Sister Elizabeth Costigan, whose farewell Mass we celebrated here last Monday, with her family and Charity Sisters near and far all. Her motto comes straight from John the Baptist: ***“He must increase, I must decrease.”*** What’s more, it certainly matches today’s them as well. The continuity between John’s message and that of Jesus is seamless, as the Baptist is already proclaiming Good News for those who repent and see a new way of living their lives with a changed attitude.

Once again, we see highlighted those on the fringe. Tax-collectors and soldiers were not at the top of the popularity polls at that time. The former were known for their corrupt practices, feathering their own nests along the way, as could be expected of Zaccheus up the tree later on! He’s not the first tax-collector to be hit with the good news Gospel! It is said of the Roman taxation system that it was riddled with inconsistencies and prone to corruption, and presumably evasion by those who could most afford to pay their share, so some things don’t change. It’s still an issue in today’s society and broader world. Someone has to pay for health, education, welfare, the roads, law and order, and so on it goes!

With respect to the soldiers, it is suggested that they were enlisted locally from the Jewish community and expected to conform with Roman requirements of keeping order and ensuring observance of the civil laws, beyond Jewish religious law, and to stop insurrections against the rather large Roman empire of the day (a population of up to 70 million). The perception of them was that they had sold their souls, to some extent, by serving the oppressors. Nevertheless, it wasn’t all bad, and there was Pax Romana (27BC to 180AD), for much of the time, perhaps apart from 70AD, with the destruction of the Temple and the attack on Jerusalem. Luke likes to situate his Gospel in the historical context of his time.

Luke is open to all being welcomed for baptism, whatever their backgrounds, presenting John as being quite tolerant of the need for taxation and military order, but not exploitation of the vulnerable nor violent aggression. Like Jesus later on, John the Baptist is presented as accepting of the way society was structured, but challenging the people to live in a way where they chose goodness and avoided evil, accepting a need for personal conversion to changing negative attitudes and sinful ways, and to care for each other with love.

Luke’s approach is to emphasize the inversion of expectations, with the lowly raised up and the poor being acknowledged as important and deserving of attention and care. While John the Baptist seems to have adopted a tough, ascetical life, he’s not asking others to follow that model, but just to have a sense of social justice and give each other a fair go, especially those looked down on or left out. The fundamental message is that God’s love reaches out to all, regardless of social class or background, so Luke’s theme of universality is clear in his Gospel from the start. Attitudes and behaviour towards each other count most, not ritual, law and sacrifice in the traditional way, all of which has its place, but not as an end in itself.

I repeat a few of my words about Sister Elizabeth Costigan, as a prime example of getting the basics of discipleship, living life well and the challenges of adapting to a changing Church and world.

Following her retirement from her work at CLC Eltham, for the last 4 years or so, Liz was a warm, quiet and friendly presence here at St Therese’s, regularly at 10am daily Mass, with always a greeting and a smile for all. I only came to know her then. From others, I knew that she was enduring serious illness, but there was never a word of complaint from her, but rather a positive comment about doing well enough in the circumstances.

When she arrived here, I had an inkling that she was a notorious figure in the Charity Sisters, so consulted Dr Google, to see what I could find, and there she was, with a lovely tribute from principal Stephanie Evans in September 2017, part of which I dare quote now: ***“You have touched the lives of so many members of this College community in different ways. Liz, thank you for your unfailing capacity to care for us; thank you for so generously and graciously walking with us on our respective journeys; thank you being there to celebrate the great times with us; thank you for being there for each of us in times of personal challenge;***

thank you for giving us the opportunity to experience the joy of feeling loved and truly known. Liz, when I think of you, I think about and I feel a beautiful gentle breeze, bringing love, compassion, joy and inviting discernment; spreading the love of Christ amongst us.” It is impossible to put it any better than that!

In her earlier life here at St Therese's, Liz, as Sister Mary St Michael, came here as principal in 1969 (*Year of the Moon Landing, 747 and Concorde, and annulments took off in the Roman Rota!*), and was in that role for 5 or so years, morphing readily into Sister Elizabeth within a year! In the 1986 parish history book, it is recorded that the class sizes in 1970 were near the 50 mark, on average. I know from parishioners at that time, that she was well loved and appreciated there too.

Liz has also been involved in parish life in pastoral care, so is there any area into which she has not delved and reinvented herself, forging new and effective ways of living the Gospel with the People of God?

The words that come easily to describe Liz might be trite, but are all true to the way in which she lived her life and treated others, loving, faithful, sensitive, compassionate, welcoming, inclusive and open-minded.

If this isn't Gospel lived in word and action, then what is? As Tony Feeney (*PP of Moonee Ponds*) said: ***“You don't need to say much: She was a woman of the Beatitudes!”***

Her lifelong love and care for so many, and for leading by example all the way as a faithful follower of Jesus. Hers was a life well lived, steeped deeply in faith, and an interesting combination of quiet humility and strength. It fitted well with John the Baptist's call today.

john hannon

12th December 2021