

1 December

It was simply delightful during the week to read newspaper coverage, positive newspaper coverage, of the Apostolic Exhortation issued by Pope Francis called the 'Joy of the Gospel'. In this document, Pope Francis sets out his vision for the Church and gives us a wonderful meditation on the gift of faith. For this remarkable pope, he continues to draw attention by stating important things in simple and uncomplicated ways. The pope is challenging Catholics to break-out of established ways of doing things, to be daring, to be prophetic, basically to be unafraid.

His first theme is that faith is not a burden, that the Christian faith is not simply a list of laws and prohibitions we need to obey in order to win God's favour. The gift of faith changes our lives, the gift of faith fills us with joy, the gift of faith widens our vision to tackle horizons beyond our imagining. With the gift of faith, Christians always see the reality around them in a different light. In today's first reading, the prophet Isaiah holds before the people an extraordinary vision. They are being invited on a journey to go up to the mountain of the Lord, to encounter the living God who is their hope, their joy and their salvation. The Lord will teach us his ways and we will walk in his paths. This vision is so wonderful that nations will literally stream to it. Isaiah has this vision of thousands of people walking together on this journey. The people are not being invited into a building; they are being invited on a journey of encounter. And today's psalm gives us an indication of what happens on this journey – we will go rejoicing to the house of the Lord. And this is precisely the theme that Pope Francis repeats over and over again – faith brings real joy into our lives.

I love the Advent cycle of readings and the many characters who appear in the Advent and Christmas story. They are profoundly human characters who reflect for us something not just of the journey of faith but the many questions and stirrings of the human heart. Take Mary, the Mother of Jesus. This teenage Jewish girl has her life completely turned upside down because of the message of an angel. Mary has been chosen by God to bring forth the Saviour. Bang; a sudden and unpredictable change to her life. How many questions did she have, how much uncertainty, how much fear and confusion? How many times must

her faith have been questioned? And how does God respond to these deeply human questions? 'Mary, do not be afraid'. And what does Mary do? She responds in faith and says, 'Let your will be done'.

And the lesson for each of us? Faith drives out uncertainty and fear. Faith gives courage. Faith brings joy. The gift of faith really does change our lives and our perspective on things. In today's second reading, St Paul reminds us that faith brings light. We gather each Sunday to be nourished and to nourish others, to be strengthened and to strengthen others, through the gift of faith which we celebrate. We gather in a spirit of prayer and rejoicing here as a parish community. The Spirit of God gathers us together as the one body of Christ. Today is the first Sunday of Advent, a new season, new colours, and a new focus for the Church. While we are all part of that mad scramble to get to Christmas, the call of faith is to see with new eyes and hear with new ears the God who comes to us every day, sometimes in the most unexpected places and in the most unexpected people.

Advent is a time that sets us free. Advent is a time that fills us with joy. Advent is a time that strengthens the gift of faith. Above all, Advent is a time when we are conscious of the God who comes to visit us in the poverty and simplicity of his Son, born in the manger. And from that manger shines a wonderful light that fills the earth with joy. Pope Francis continues to call us to be a biblical people, to be a people of joy and to bring some joy into the lives of those who have none. Here we gather in faith. Here we gather in prayer and celebration. Here we are called, rejoicing in the house of the Lord.