



**What does man ask of life if not happiness? The Hebrew Bible uses something like twenty-seven synonyms to express the feeling of joy. Nothing could be more contrary to the Bible, therefore, than the religion of suffering, moroseness, frowning faces that are seen even in our Sunday assemblies.**

**But how to achieve happiness? Is wealth, good health, success enough? Who can be considered truly blessed?**

**The Israelite of the earliest times answered this question: happy is**

**the one who enjoys the fruits of his field (Is 9:2), who cheers his heart with wine (Jdg 9:13), who has a close family (Dt 1:7) and has many children (1 S 2:1,5). Happy are the people who obtain a military victory (1 Sam 18:6), who contemplates their rebuilt city (Ne 12:43), who celebrates with hymns, music and dance the abundant harvest that God has given him (Dt 16:11). We know that these are not enough.**

**With our cunning, devices and efforts we can achieve happiness, good mood, euphoria, exhilaration, enjoyment, fun, but not joy. This is the fruit of the Spirit and we can only welcome it as a gift.**

**We can, however, place obstacles: today's readings will help us to identify and remove them.**

**To internalize the message, we repeat:  
*“Alleluia, the God of joy is among us.”***

**-----[First Reading](#) | [Second Reading](#) | [Gospel](#)-----**

**“Woe to the rebellious, the defiled, the city that oppresses ... . Her kings are like roaring lions, her rulers like evening wolves ... . Her prophets are blabbermouths and treacherous ... . Her priests defile whatever is sacred with no respect for the Law” (Zep 3:1-4). Thus the third chapter of the book of Zephaniah begins from which our reading comes.**

**We are in one of the most difficult moments of Israel's history. In**

**Jerusalem everyone is corrupt: the king, the priests, the prophets, and the judges. The people have abandoned the faith and betrayed her God.**

**What to do in such a situation? Zephaniah has no alternative: he begins to threaten with disasters. The first words he speaks in the name of the Lord, are: “I will wipe out everything from the face of the earth. I will put an end to humans and animals ... . I will wipe humankind from the face of the earth” (Zep 1:2-3). He continues: the day of punishment is coming “the day of wrath, anguish, distress, destruction, darkness, of dark clouds, sounds of trumpet and call for battle” (Zep 1:15-16). He goes on in this vein until almost the end of his book. Then, suddenly, here is the prophecy in our reading.**

**Looking at the people he cries: “Cry out with joy ... . Sing joyfully with all your heart!” (v. 14), “do not be afraid nor let your hands tremble!” (v. 16).**

**The change in tone is as evident as unexpected and unexplained. Why does the prophet pass from threats to an invitation to joy, serenity, and confidence? What happened, what has changed in Jerusalem? Have the people perhaps converted, changed life, did penance?**

**No. The reason is another: “the Lord has lifted the sentence.” Jerusalem will not be punished, will not be caught by any misfortune (v. 15). It is true that she was an unfaithful spouse. She betrayed her God, but he will not drive her away from him forever. He “will revive his love” (v. 17) and she will become as beautiful as a young girl. She will be the consolation of her**

**husband and he will be happy with her, “he will jump for joy ... he will cry out with joy” ( vv. 17-18).**

**And the threatened punishments? This text evidently shows in what the day of God’s wrath consists of. It is not the moment when he loses patience, gets angry for the wickedness of people and decides to punish them. It is the day when finally he is able to drive home his love.**

**The wrath of God is not hurled against the sinner, but against sin. God performs only works of salvation.**

**The prophet Zephaniah lived in a time when his people was close to ruin. He announces the victory of God over sin and the radical transformation of the social, political and religious situation. That is the reason for calling all the poor of the country to rejoice.**

**This prophecy is important because Luke uses it to describe the annunciation to Mary. The expressions, “Rejoice, do not be afraid,” “God is within you,” are the same expressions that the angel will address to Mary. The evangelist takes them to tell us that the prophecy was fulfilled, when in Mary, the Son of God took our mortal body.**

**In Jesus of Nazareth, God has really come to dwell among his people; he has brought salvation and with it the fullness of joy.**

**Fear can have a positive role in our lives. It signals the dangerous effects deriving from the foolish choices, suggests pondering and leads to wisdom. Zephaniah also resorted to threats. He did so to denounce the moral misery of his people and to warn against**

**disasters resulting therefrom.**

**But there is a fear that causes only anxieties and phobias, which introduces one in a negative and pessimistic view of life. It leads to depression, which causes one to fall back on remorse and a glimpse of an executioner God who expects man for the showdown. This fear plays into the hands of atheists and unbelievers who incite people to abandon this faith that stops the growth, prevents the realization and happiness of man.**

**The only healthy fear is one that comes from the clear and immediate perception of the negative consequences of the choices of sin. However, for it to be helpful, it must be located within the project of salvation. It must be accompanied and supported by the firm conviction that the love of God will eventually prevail. However, it should—as suggested by today’s reading—always result in joy.**

**Second Reading: Philippians 4:4-7**

**Paul writes to the community at Philippi from Ephesus. He is in prison because of the Gospel and would have every reason to be sad and dejected. Instead, the invitation to joy comes back like a refrain in his letter. An invitation that appears for the first time when the apostle mentioned his condition as a prisoner: “If I am poured out as a libation sacrifice of your faith—he says to the Philippians—I rejoice and continue to share your joy and you likewise should rejoice and share my joy” (Phil 2:17-18). Then the letter exposes his apostolic projects and he takes up the theme of joy: “My brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord!” (Phil 3:1). Finally here is the even more explicit and insistent exhortation,**

repeated in today's reading: "Rejoice in the Lord always; I say it again: rejoice!" (v. 4).

**What is the reason for the joy of the Philippians?**

It is not the success in life, good health, good performance of the economy, the lack of concern (Paul and the Philippians had it as many as we have today), but the certainty that "the Lord is near." This is the thought that accompanies the Christians and that makes them affable, kind, and generous towards all (v. 5).

Faith gives the certainty that everything that happens does not escape God's plan and then everything will turn out well. Who is animated by this confidence never despairs. He cannot be caught by anxiety or upset with anguish but exposes to the Lord his every need in prayer (v. 6). From this union with God, he receives peace as a gift.

Gospel: Luke 3:10-18

"You brood of vipers! How will you escape when the divine punishment comes?" Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? The ax is already laid to the root of the tree and every tree that fails to produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire" (Lk 3:7,9). John welcomes those who come to him to be baptized with these stern words. He will also have a reason but his threats do not certainly seem "good news" nor are in keeping with the theme of joy that characterizes the readings of this Sunday.

"Produce now fruits of a true change of heart" (Lk 3:8)—he repeats to the crowds. But what are these works? The simple

**people whom he addresses expect clear proposals, not abstract and generic speeches.**

**In the first part of today's Gospel (vv. 10-14), there are three groups of people—the people, the tax collectors, the soldiers—who go to the Baptist to have concrete directions. It is a ternary scheme of questions and answers needed to present exemplary situations (see: Lk 9:57-62). It is a literary device that invites to apply the ascetic principle stated by the Baptist to other similar cases.**

**The question: “What should we do?” is taken several times in the work of Luke (Acts 2:37; 16:30; 22:10). It indicates a complete willingness to accept the will of God by one who realizes that he went off the road, is determined to change his life and seeks direction on the way to take.**

**Let's imagine that one of us, eager to prepare well for Christmas, asks this same question to those we consider “experts” in the field of religion (catechists, pastoral worker, the nun, the priest). What would they tell us?**

**Someone would suggest to help a brother who is in difficulty or to visit a sick person. However, we will also have other answers: “Recite the rosary every day”; “Pray three Salve Regina before going to sleep”; “Go and confess” ... These are good pieces of advice—mind you—but the Baptist did not choose this path. He does not suggest anything specifically “religious,” nor recommends devotional practices, ceremonies, penances (imposition of ashes, fasting, prayers, and spiritual retreats in the desert). He demands something very concrete: a major overhaul of one's life from the**

**ethical principle of loving a brother or a sister.**

**To the people he says: “If you have two coats, give one to the person who has none; and if you have food, do the same” (vv. 10-11).**

**Last Sunday the Baptist invited us to review our relationship with God if we want to prepare for the coming of the Messiah. He called for a change in thinking and acting for the forgiveness of sins (Lk 1:3). Today he focuses on the new relationship that must be established with the neighbor. Love, solidarity, sharing, removal of inequities and abuses of power are the key words of his speech.**

**One certainly cannot accuse the Baptist of lack of clarity. Prayers and devotions are fine, as long as they do not become an alibi, provided they are not used as devices to escape the demand for sharing of goods with those in need.**

**We voluntarily gather to pray, to sing, but when we are asked to make available to the brothers and sisters the goods we possess ... all our religious enthusiasm suddenly vanish. Yet the Baptist is still “sympathetic” towards human weakness. He says: “If you have two coats give one to the person who has none.” Jesus will demand even more from his disciples: “From the one who takes your coat, do not keep back your shirt” (Lk 6:29).**

**Even tax collectors presented themselves to John. They are the ones whose profession was most hated by the people: they collected taxes and were collaborators with the oppressive system of the Romans. They enriched themselves by extorting money from the weak and defenseless. The Baptist does not ask them to**

**change profession, but not to take advantage of their trade to exploit the poor.**

**We may think of not having anything to do with this profession. Instead—let’s face it—we act as “tax collectors” when, for example, we reach a prestigious position, we demand a very high pay for our performance, perhaps citing as justification: “These are the set rates.”**

**The publican is the symbol of one who casually handles money. A tax collector is the one who buys and sells unscrupulously thinking only of self-interest. A publican is also one who, with clever scams, manages to fool the simple people, evades taxes, weaves fraud against the state, and exploits the poor’s ingenuity to enrich oneself.**

**Who acts as a “publican” certainly cannot prepare for Christmas only with a few prayers.**

**The soldiers are the last to ask the Baptist for advice. We would expect that John would counsel them to take their uniform off, to immediately throw their arms and refuse to fight. But even here he shows himself “tolerant.” Jesus will be more radical and will prohibit any recourse to violence. He will say to the disciple: “Do not oppose evil with evil; if someone slaps you on the right cheek, you turn and offer the other” (Mt 5:39).**

**The soldiers of that time were poorly paid, and what were they doing? Having weapons in hand, they took advantage of their power to beat up people, harass women, extort money and impose harsh and humiliating services on the weakest, bully the poor**

**farmers and force them to carry loads. The Baptist asks them not to mistreat anyone and be content with their wages.**

**The soldiers are the symbol of those who may abuse their power. Who profits from his occupied position, the profession one exercises to dominate or overwhelm the weakest behaves like a soldier (naturally of that time). He is invited to review his behavior if he wants to prepare for the coming of the Lord.**

**In the second part of the Gospel (vv. 15-18) the Baptist resumes his seemingly hard, rigorous, almost intolerant language. He talks of separation of the good wheat from the chaff and threatens its destruction in the unquenchable fire. It seems that he leaves no margin for sinners to exult: An imminent and terrible judgment of God awaits them.**

**The evangelist ends the harsh speech of John with a surprising sentence: “With these and many other words of consolation, John announced the Good News to the people” (v. 18). You read right: words of consolation (this is the correct translation of the verb ??????????). For Luke, the message of John the Baptist is good news. It is a joyful news; it is the promise of a happy event.**

**John’s manner of expression perhaps does not conform to our current sensitivity. It is neither sweet nor tender, but what he wants to communicate are joy and hope. If we look closely at the text, we see that he does not promise any punishment from God. He speaks only of the coming of the Holy Spirit and fire that will destroy the chaff.**

**Water cleanses, but it can also kill, submerge and drown a person.**

**When those who came to John to be baptized dipped in the river Jordan, John performed a gesture that meant purification from the stains of sin and death to the past life. Nothing more. His baptism was an imperfect, incomplete one—and the forerunner of this was perfectly conscious. He knew that the water he had employed was an external cleansing.**

**To become lifeblood, the water should be absorbed by plants. It should be drunk and assimilated by animals and people.**

**Jesus' baptism is not water that cleans the outside. It is water that penetrates, transforms and revitalizes. And “the water will become in them a spring of water, welling up to eternal life” (Jn 4:14). It is his Spirit, the power of God that transforms the old man into a new creature. It is the fulfillment of the prophecy of Ezekiel: “I shall pour pure water over you and you shall be made clean—cleansed from the defilement of all your idols. I shall give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you. I shall remove your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I shall put my spirit within you and move you to follow my decrees and keep my laws” (Ezk 36:25-27).**

**At this point the image of the fire also becomes clear. Jesus himself will speak about it later: “I have come to bring fire upon the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled” (Lk 12:49). It is not the fire prepared to punish unrepentant sinners. The only fire that God knows is what Jesus brought to earth; it is the Spirit who renews the face of the earth (Ps 104:1). It will descend from heaven at Pentecost (Acts 2:3) and unite people in one language, that of love.**

**This will be the fire that will purify the world from all evil, which will destroy any “chaff.” It’s not the sinners who must fear the coming of Christ, but sin whose destruction is announced. Sinners must only rejoice because liberation from the evil that keeps them slaves has arrived.**

**There are many joys that are not Christian. The Baptist points the way to fill the heart with true joy: to prepare the coming of the Lord in their lives by sharing goods with the poor and by the rejection of any form of abuse of power, of overwhelming and insincerity to the brethren.**

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