

## *Gaudete Sunday – Finding Joy*

Every year on the third Sunday of Advent the Church asks us to meditate on joy.

Few things are as misunderstood as is the notion of joy. Because of such misunderstanding we are often left chasing the wrong things in life.

Too often we confuse joy with good cheer or with a certain rallying of the spirit that we try to crank up when we go to a party or let off steam on a Friday night.

We tend to think of joy this way:

There is *ordinary time* in our lives, when duty, work, emotional and financial burdens, tiredness, worries, and pressure of all kinds keep us from enjoying life and from being as cheery and pleasant as we would like.

We think of *ordinary times* in our lives – the grind, the routine, the rat-race, the work-week – as keeping us from joy and so we look forward to *special times*: weekends, nights out, holidays, celebrations, parties where we can break the routine, escape, and ‘enjoy’ ourselves.

Joy is thus identified with the boisterous good cheer we try to stir up at parties or the lack of pressure and the freedom from burdens that we feel when on vacation.

But is this joy?

The loud robust conviviality that we enter into at parties can be little more than a desperate effort to keep our depressions at bay, perhaps a form of denial. That’s why the happiness dissolves so quickly when we go home and – similarly - why, three days after returning from a vacation, we are again just as tired and in need of a vacation as before.

What then is joy?

Joy can never be induced, cranked up, or made to happen. You can’t find joy, it has to find you. It’s something that comes to us - and precisely within our ordinary, duty-bound, burdened, full-of-worries, and pressured lives. That’s its real quality. Joy is always the by-product or **fruit** of something else.

As the various versions of *The Prayer of St Francis* put it, we can never attain joy, consolation, peace, forgiveness, love, and understanding by actively pursuing them. We attain them by *giving them out*.

That's the great paradox at the centre of all spirituality and one of the great foundational truths within the universe itself. Joy will come to us if we set about actively trying to create it for *others*, just like the air we breathe out will eventually be the air we breathe back in.

If I go about my life **demanding**, however unconsciously...

that others carry me rather than my seeking to carry them;  
feeding off others rather than trying to feed them;  
creating stress for others rather than being an agent of peace;  
demanding to be admired or respected rather than being respectful and admiring;  
expecting that others meet my needs rather than trying to meet theirs...  
then joy will never find me, no matter how hard I party or try to work up cheerfulness.

The great mystic, St John of the Cross, ends one of his most famous instructions with this poem:

*To reach satisfaction in all, desire satisfaction in nothing  
To come to possess all, desire the possession of nothing.  
To arrive at being all, desire to be nothing.  
To come to the knowledge of all, desire the knowledge of nothing.  
To come to the pleasure you have not, you must go by the way in which you enjoy not.  
To come to the knowledge you have not, you must go by a way in which you know not.  
To come to the possession you have not, you must go by a way in which you possess not.  
To come to be what you are not, you must go by a way in which you are not.*

That, and that alone, is a recipe for joy.