

## ADVENT 3 2011: YEAR B

John came as a witness, to testify to the light...and he bore witness to the one standing there among his hearers, as we heard in this morning's gospel, the one whom they did not know, did not recognise. John the Baptist's voice still calls across the centuries, bearing witness to the true light...but now, I suppose, we think that we *do* know him, that we *do* recognise him...for, after all, He was born in Bethlehem, He dwelt among us, the Word made flesh. We believe in One Lord Jesus Christ, who was born of the Virgin Mary. We have seen and we believe. This is one reason, we might say, why this is a Sunday for rejoicing, *Gaudete* Sunday, rose-coloured Sunday. Rejoice in the Lord always: the Introit sentence for this Sunday; and today we heard from Isaiah: I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, he has clothed me with the garments of salvation. Rejoice always, writes St Paul to the Thessalonians. For he is at hand, the true light; and we look forward to celebrating his birthday with joy, because we know his story, we know Him. But do we *really* recognise him as he stands among us? Do we really understand what this true light displays? If you go into a room and turn on the light, the room is not changed; but it is shown up for what it is, tidy, let us say, or untidy. If the light of Christ shines into the room of our lives, our hearts, our minds, those lives and hearts and minds will be shown up for what they are, for the state they're in. Or to draw the picture in a different way; the one standing among us will baptise us, says St John, with the Holy Spirit. He will plunge us into the Holy Spirit...and do we recognise what that is? It is purifying fire! The pure and dazzling light of Christ: the molten streams of fire which are the work of the Holy Spirit in hearts and minds. These are our portion as today we rejoice that the Lord is at hand.

This, at least as I hear it in our Catholic tradition, is an invitation to find the Lord within the Sacrament of Reconciliation...it's a Sacrament, involving personal confession in the presence of a priest, for which we prepare by allowing the light of Christ to shine on the room of our lives, and the Holy Spirit's fire to purify and cleanse us. It's a Sacrament moreover, as Fr Philip North put it once in an article, which is not guilt-inducing, but guilt-relieving. But it's also a Sacrament which has a proper and honoured place in Anglicanism; one of the saddest things I've heard since coming here is a person saying that he couldn't make his confession in the Church of England. And another sadness is the neglect of this Sacrament among those Anglicans who delight to call themselves Catholic. (Let me just say here that in the pewsheet you'll find specific times for the hearing of confessions before Christmas, as well as a reminder that if you prefer you may arrange a suitable time with a priest). In these days of troubled debate among those of the Catholic tradition in the Church of England on the issues of the ordination of women to the episcopate and homosexuality, what is sorely needed is a deeper appreciation of the fullness of our inheritance and a confident affirmation of it. Thus, being 'High Church' should mean, among other things, that we value the *corporate* understanding of being the Body of Christ over individualism, *our* communion with Christ and with one another over *my* communion. Sacraments are the pledge and the seal of such a corporate, social understanding of the Christian faith. Baptism is our entry into the Body of Christ in which there are many members. Holy Communion is the expression of our identity with one another in Christ, and the means of growing up together as His body. And the Sacrament of Reconciliation? This is restoration to our baptismal state, so that with a sense of joy and freedom we may come again to the feast of Holy Communion. That's where the origins of this Sacrament lie...in the need and the desire to re-

establish the fullness of *belonging* which was offered in our baptism. The Sacrament of Reconciliation may be exercised in private, but just as much as Baptism and Eucharist, it is a Sacrament concerned with what it means to be the Body of Christ. So...we must rejoice that the Lord is at hand, but at hand as light shining upon the darkness of the individualism and obsession with ourselves which cuts us off from God and neighbour. Preparation for making our confession isn't about ticking boxes in a manual; it's about allowing the light of Christ and the fire of His Spirit to open us up to our broken relationship with God...failure to long to know and love Him more: our broken relationship with our neighbour...pressing the question: 'and who *is* my neighbour?' He or she may be next door to me in church, along the street, here in Worcester...but maybe in Calcutta, struggling with poverty and despair: so how have I thought about *her*, prayed about *him*, spoken about *her*, responded to *his* need? Pressing questions indeed.

But then the light is the light of mercy as well as of judgment. The Lord is at hand to beckon us with his kindness along the road of self-awareness, to draw us with cords of compassion and mercy, to recall us to the liberation of the baptised, to find once a more a seat at the banquet where generosity, mutuality and openness are celebrated, and the desire to dominate or manipulate or oppress is banished. This is the movement of Holy Spirit...a purification, yes, in the fire of Pentecost, but a loosening of the tongue as well, to speak to ourselves and to others good news, a freedom from the prisons of suspicion and defensiveness. It's new birth, baptismal birth, cleansing, refreshment...homecoming. We leave the confessional with Christ's perspective on God and neighbour, and with the encouragement to see ourselves and our relationships in the light of Christ. And does it last, people may ask. Well maybe not; but the joy is that the resources are there for us again and again, the resources of God's mercy, the prodigal's Father coming to meet his child. Rejoice in the Lord, always, and again I say, rejoice. He is at hand to lead us home, to be seated at his table, to be his Body restored, his Body inclusive of all his children.