

REJOICE! SUNDAY

It is actually the 2nd Reading of Cycle C's 3rd Sunday of Advent that has the original "Epistle" from the older (pre-Vatican II) Lectionary—Philippians 4:4-7. The opening words of this reading, in the *Vulgate* (Latin) translation of St. Jerome, were "*Gaudete!*" "Rejoice!" And this is why the 3rd Sunday of Advent is traditionally known by this name. But of course we are in Cycle B this year; what kind of "rejoicing" is offered to us today?

We get lucky this year: the 2nd reading is I Thessalonians 5:16-24, and it also begins with the word "Rejoice." But the real key to the how and why of rejoicing comes from the 1st reading, that of Isaiah 61:1-2a, 10-11.

This is one of the most pivotal passages of the entire Old Testament for grasping Jesus' self-understanding, and for grasping the Church's continuing understanding of our Messiah. It is the passage read by Jesus in the synagogue at His home-town of Nazareth (Luke 4:16ff.), of which He says, "Today, this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing." It is also the 1st reading for the Holy Week Chrism Mass, yoked as it is to the renewal of priestly promises and the blessing of the anointing oils for the following year.

And so we learn that we can and should rejoice because the Anointed One has been sent to the poor, to the broken-hearted, to captives and prisoners: He has come to heal us and set us free! We all are poor in one way or another. We all have had our hearts broken. We are all captive and imprisoned in some form or fashion. And we all yearn for liberation. We are told to rejoice because that liberation is here for us.

"The one who is coming after me," says John the Baptist, is the Mighty One of God. And the might of the Messiah will be revealed in the power of healing, forgiving and liberation. It is a might different from what Rome [or the chief priests, or the 'zealots'] would have recognized. But it will be a far more fundamental liberation. Most of us want to be set free from the burdens of others; Jesus proclaims the desire to set us free from ourselves: our more sinful nature, our weakness, our brokenness. Of course, this will mean we must become "new persons" (see II Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15). Are we ready for such a radical release from sin? No longer will there be anyone to blame for our failures; no longer any barricades to doing justice, loving mercy & walking humbly with our God (Micah 6:8). We can throw away our crutches, but we have then to walk in the Way. Are we ready to rejoice?