

A Homily Advent 3 Sunday 13th December, 2009.

Mass Readings: Zephaniah 3: 14–18; Philippians 4:4–7; Luke 3:10–18.

A woman dies and arrives at the gates of heaven. She knocks on the wide doors hoping to be admitted. An angel appears and asks:

"What's the password? Tell me and you may enter."

"The password?" The woman mumbles. She racks her brains to think what it might be. Now you have to understand that this lady while living her life here has lived as best she can. In fact she's been a bit overly dutiful with regard to her spiritual disciplines and responsibilities, and been altogether pretty hard on herself. She's certainly studied the scriptures, so she says:

"Whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

"No" replies the angel. "That's not the password."

She thinks some more. "The just shall live by faith?"

"No."

She's going to try her best shot yet. "Whoever believes in me, even though he dies yet shall he live." That should do it, she thought to herself.

"No," says the angel. She feels she's running out of options.

"God loved the world so much that He sent His only Son so that whosoever believes in Him might not perish but have everlasting life."

"No."

She starts to panic: "There is no longer any condemnation for them who are living in Christ Jesus."

"No. Those are all true sayings," says the angel, "but they aren't the password – I'll have to hurry you time is running out I'm afraid."

She's getting desperate, and starts to cry, feeling herself backed up against a wall – the alternatives for her don't bear thinking about.

"Oh I give up!" she exclaims.

"That's it! That's it!" Shouts the angel. 'I give up'!! "That's the password. Come on in!" And the gates open wide.

Sometimes in trying to make an impression we can lose sight of what's essential.

The most extraordinary aspect of the second reading for today's Mass is that it was written by Paul while he was in jail. The entire letter to the Philippians was written

in prison under miserable external conditions – poor food, dampness, cramped space, dirt, cockroaches and lice – a time of terrible external uncertainty, always overshadowed by the threat of death and torture. Yet Paul, in this letter, written under such horrible conditions, refers on sixteen occasions to joy. His outward circumstances are gruesome; his inner circumstances are radiant. He refers to a profound happiness and freedom that cannot be conditioned by external circumstances but only shaped by an inner recognition, by a deep spiritual interior intuition. It's proclaimed in the first reading today from the prophet Zephaniah: *"Rejoice! The Lord is in your midst, (within and among you) a victorious warrior you have no more evil to fear."* The Kingdom of God – who is the Person of Christ, a mighty warrior – is within you, among you, you have no more evil to fear.

For Advent I'm reading the journal of Etty Hillesum, a young Dutch Jewish woman, who wrote in her diary in Amsterdam on Sunday 12th July 1942: *"Dear God, we must help you to help us, and defend your dwelling place inside us to the last. There are, it is true, some who even at this late stage, while we are being rounded up every day, putting their vacuum cleaners and silver forks and spoons in safekeeping instead of guarding you, dear God. And there are those who want to put their bodies in safekeeping but who are nothing more than a shelter for a thousand fears and bitter feelings. And they say, "I shan't let them get me in their clutches." But they forget that no one is in their clutches who is in your arms."* I love those last few words. *"No one is in their clutches who is in your arms."* This young woman was facing a nightmare, and she died in Ravensbruck concentration camp in fact a few months later. Her outer circumstances, like Paul's, were gruesome, her inner circumstances were radiant.

This is what must be safeguarded, this inner recognition, this interior song, this alternative story-line – *"The Lord is in your midst, a victorious warrior; you have nothing more to fear."* This is what we all must do, safeguard this inner presence, though everything around us may be seemingly falling into ruin, or heading into

confusion. This inner presence we safeguard by giving up, by surrender, by abandonment, by faith. We give up because, as St John says: the One who is coming, the One for us who is already here, is powerful. We have nothing more to fear, nothing.

The people, the tax collectors, and some soldiers came to John the Baptist and asked him: "So what must we do," and he gave them clear and practical guidelines. Under-pinning those practical guidelines is his conviction that, as he says: "*Someone is coming*"..... a victorious warrior. He asks them to change some of their priorities in life so that when Jesus comes they will be prepared, and be able to make a deeper response to His message. What Jesus will be saying to them will then make more sense. If John was standing here today, with us, he would tell us to do something too – to guard and hold on to the flame of trust, despite all our disappointments, in that conviction that no one is in the clutches of death and despondency who is already in His arms.

One might respond: "Well that's easy to say, but I don't feel it." We aren't invited to feel it; we may feel nothing. In fact we may feel the precise opposite! The condition governing the truth concerning what Zephaniah, John the Baptist, Isaiah, and the other biblical prophets foretell about the coming of Christ, and the fulfilment of His promises, is never dependant upon our emotional response to their message, but upon our simple trust and belief in the power of the Holy Spirit who speaks through them. We don't believe in the truths of our faith because it feels good to do so, but because of the divine authority of the One who has spoken them, and whose promises cannot fail. Unlike New Age fantasy, Christianity is much more concrete, more grounded, much more earthy. Christianity is about the fully human, fully, alive, fully present, fully involved Person of Christ. Christianity isn't authenticated in an individual simply through what he or she feels, but through whom he or she has met – within. This is hugely important in a culture such as ours that, with respect to any sort of choice of spiritual option, which says that if it feels good it must be

right, and if it's true for me then that's all that matters. That's bunkum basically. I must fit into God, and not try and fit God into my little world, that's simply idol worship. We must safeguard our inner receptivity to His promises simply because He has promised them. Someone is coming, and I must be ready. And in order to be ready I may have to change, radically.

Well then, I just give up. Give up what? If your car breaks down at 1.39 a.m. on the B2689 somewhere north of the Cairngorms and you phone up the emergency number of the AA on your mobile and you speak to the receptionist who records your breakdown and your location and says to you "Stay with the vehicle – someone is coming," what do you do? You give up. You give up what? You give up worrying. You believe her. You may not feel like it, but you do. Someone will be there in half an hour at the latest, someone who knows precisely what to do. Being the sort of person you are you may still worry of course, and nurture a thousand and one anxieties concerning things that might happen in the next half hour. You could be attacked by a werewolf, for example, or taken off by Count Dracula to his nearby castle retreat – but the strength of the promise remains. Paul says there is no need to worry; to think there is is in your imagination only. There is in actual fact no need to worry. It's easy to say but hard to live – but what a message, what a proclamation, what a witness, what a testimony. *"Let your tolerance be evident to everyone,"* Paul says. Why? How? Because the Lord is very near. "Stay with the vehicle – someone is coming." Stay with the promise – don't lose heart.

This is the invitation offered to me again today: to trust in the victory of One, whose love is unconquerable, who is mighty, powerful, and whose promises of ultimate victory cannot be gainsaid.

Someone comes to me now, in this Mass, who is victorious, powerful, the Lord, a

mighty warrior. He always wants to share with me the fruits of His victory. He brings to my heart, my soul, my life, His authority over evil in all its forms. What must I do to receive Him? The prophets of Advent would tell us to give up, to give up on worry, on fear, on despondency, on doubt. Do you know what might be described as the simplest act of love towards Christ? To give up worrying, fretting, anxiety, to let go of these things, so as to validate in your life His words to Thomas after His resurrection, who doubted the resurrection – *“Happy are those who have not seen and yet believe.”* May those words refer to us.

Let's clear the threshing floor of anxieties and complaints, and prepare the way for joy and victory – for He is coming.