# Third Sunday of Advent: News of great joy

*The shepherds at those tidings
Rejoicèd much in mind,
And left their flocks a-feeding
In tempest, storm and wind,
And went to Bethlehem straightway
This blessèd Babe to find.
O tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy,*

*O tidings of comfort and joy!*

**(‘God rest you merry, gentlemen’ from *Christmas Collection*, no. 33)**

## Scripture

* Luke 2:10 ‘But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people”.’
* Philippians 4:4 ‘Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: rejoice!’

## Introduction

* The third Sunday in Advent is traditionally when we light the candle of joy. It’s also known as Gaudete Sunday, which is the Latin for ‘rejoice’.
* Out in the fields, in the darkest of night, Luke 2:8-20 tells us how the angels visited the shepherds and shared the good news about Jesus’ birth that would ‘cause great joy for all the people’ (Luke 2:10).
* Today there is a different kind of news we are encouraged to seek out and share. Decades later Paul would write to the Philippians from prison, encouraging them to ‘Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near’ (Philippians 4:4-5).

## Context

* The news outlets today don’t often reflect the world with such joy. For it to be ‘news’ it seems it must be bad. As the saying goes, ‘Good news does not sell newspapers.’ The news of the birth of Jesus Christ is to be proclaimed as good news for everyone. The shepherds were not only the first people to be told this good news, but they were also the first people to share it. Are they the first people to experience that at the root of the word ‘mission’ is the concept of being ‘sent’? Could they have been the first gospel missionaries?
* Shepherds were among the very poorest people in society and their work often left them alone, isolated from family and the community. It is interesting that the angels came to people who may have been in the greatest need to hear the news of comfort and joy. That they were chosen to be the first people to herald the message of Jesus’ birth underlines that the poor and dispossessed have a central place in God’s heart.
* The carol ‘God rest ye merry, gentlemen’ reminds us that not only were the shepherds the first to hear the news of Jesus’ birth, but they were also the first to visit the baby Jesus.
* In John Ortberg’s book *The Life You’ve Always Wanted*, he writes:

‘We will not understand God until we understand this

about him: “God is the happiest being in the universe”

(GK Chesterton). God knows sorrow. Jesus is remembered, among other things, as a “man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief”. But the sorrow of God, like the anger of God, is his temporary response to a fallen world. That sorrow will be banished for ever from his heart on the day the world is set right. Joy is God’s basic character. God is the happiest being in the universe*.*’

* Circumstances around you may look bleak and give cause for anxiety and even fear. In our moments of stress and sorrow, we hold on to the truth that it will give way to joy, our ultimate destination. In the song ‘I’m on my Way’, written by Scotland’s famous duo The Proclaimers, they write light-heartedly: ‘I’m on my way from misery to happiness today.’ As followers of Jesus, we’re on our way to everlasting joy!

## Reflection – looking inwards

* Joy is offered as a gift to the shepherds. They did not take it in the way of snatching or grabbing. They received it. We must make room within ourselves to receive this joy – a thought that in itself may be a cause to fear.
* It is said that as a butterfly is not best chased and caught with a net; it is best for us simply to be still, and the butterfly may come to rest on us. In that sense, it chooses us. For the Holy Spirit to rest on us, to abide in us, we must create the conditions whereby he will come. ‘Be still, and know that I am God’ (Psalm 46:10 *NRSV*).
* In the UK we are educated to be critical and find the faults in order to make improvement. An announcement of good news might, therefore, be so thoroughly critiqued that the possibilities on offer can never be enjoyed. Have you ever met someone, or a group of people, who can put a damper on anything positive? New and creative thoughts and ideas are killed at their inception with such an attitude. God invites us to ‘rejoice in the Lord always’ (Philippians 4:4) which ensures that we are always open to being surprised by joy.
* For the shepherds that night, the darkness was broken by the bright shining light of the angels. Their surprise and shock is unsurprising. Light overcoming darkness, joy replacing fear, are just some of the themes related to Advent that require attention if we are to mine the depth and wonder of Christ’s coming. In doing so, we will discover that at the heart of Advent the only response we can make is: ‘Come, Lord Jesus.’

## Reflection – looking outwards

* The angels’ announcement in Luke 2:10 was to ‘all the people’ and focused on dispelling fear. There is nothing to be afraid of in allowing the joy of Christ to fill our lives.
* There is a reminder in Luke 2:10 that our job as followers of Jesus is to make sure that everyone hears the good news – we cannot rest until God’s work is done! God sends us out to share the good news of Jesus Christ with others, everywhere. ‘The world for God’ is our mission.

## Prayer

Lord Jesus, we acknowledge that you are the source of all joy, and

we thank you for the joy that you have brought to our hearts by your

very presence in us. Help us to be open to receive all the good gifts that your advent brings, and enable us through the power of your Holy Spirit to share that joy with people around us. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.