**Isaiah 66:10-14**

**Rejoice, always!**

4 July, as we know, is Independence Day in the United States, where millions of people celebrate independence from military domination by an alien power. And we are aware of the words of the Declaration of Independence: “We…the representatives of the United States of America declare, that these united colonies are…free and independent states; that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the state of Great Britain, is totally dissolved…”

 4 July 1776: The day independence was declared but far from the end of the story: there were still many hardships and battles to fight, still a great deal of discrimination to overcome. But what kept the colonists fighting and driving forward was the hope they had for a better future. Even when things were not going their way, even when friends and relatives were still dying and suffering, they had hope that the light would soon dawn.

 Hope is enough to keep individuals, even nations, alive.

 And that’s what we encounter of in our reading from Isaiah 66. Because here was a nation, the nation of Israel, that had gone through a terribly dark past. There had been evil and corruption in the land for many years and there had been prophecies that God’s judgement would come on them unless they changed their ways.

 Well, the people of Israel didn’t listen and sure enough, a terrible catastrophe came upon them. The Babylonian Empire invaded their land and took the people off into captivity in Babylon, which is now modern day Iraq. 70 years the people of Israel lanquished there until they were eventually released and allowed to go back home.

 And, of course, when they journeyed back to Jerusalem after 70 years in exile, they were not surprised to find a city laid waste by the ravages of time. Houses lay in ruin. Farms had overgrown with weeds. The temple was in a terrible state. The nation of Israel, what was left of it anyway, was on its knees. And what they needed more than anything else at this stage was someone to give them a message of hope for a better future. When things were not going their way, when their friends and relatives were suffering hardships, when their country was going to wrack and ruin, they needed hope that the light would soon dawn.

 And then these words recorded in Isaiah are given: “Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her, all you who love her…For thus says the Lord: I will extend prosperity to her like a river, and the wealth of the nations like an overflowing stream…you shall be comforted in Jerusalem…and it shall be known that the hand of the Lord is with his servants…”

 What amazing words of hope! Words that seemed to contradict their present experiences of life. Here they were, in a desolate land, looking at a city in ruins and they reflected back on their past: when they had turned to false gods, when they had declared themselves morally independent of God, when they had allowed evil to flourish and immorality to reign, when they had lost everything and been carried away to a strange land, when their lives had been hallmarked by fear and failure and sadness. They reflected on all that lay in their past. They reflected on the present reality that was evident for all to see. And yet the Word of the Lord to them was this: “Rejoice with Jerusalem…As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you.”

 Even in the midst of difficult circumstances, even seemingly against all the odds, with God there is still hope…

 So it is a very simple message that comes to us today - that whatever our current life circumstances, with God there is hope for the future. We can look at our past mistakes and failures and think there is no redemption - but with God there is always hope for the future. We can consider our present circumstances that may seem so dark and cheerless - but with God there is always hope for the future.

 God’s grace is bigger than our failure.

 God’s grace is bigger than our sense of emptiness.

 God’s grace is bigger than our fear and anxiety.

 God’s grace is bigger.

 And so this reading actually begins with a command: “Rejoice!” We are told to rejoice: “Rejoice with Jerusalem…” There’s two things to reflect on here.

 Firstly, the word ‘Rejoice’ is an imperative: not quite a command, but something we are told to do…This seems such a hard thing for us because there are times in our lives when the last thing we feel like doing is to rejoice.

 But that is the very point, I think. We may not feel like rejoicing…but feelings are such a bad barometer of faith. We all know Christians who base their faith on how they feel: when they feel close to God, they appear to be in seventh heaven. But when they aren’t feeling close to God, or life is stressful and draining, then their faith collapses.

 We simply can’t base our faith on how we feel because feelings constantly rise and fall…

 Instead, we must strive to find an equilibrium in faith that remains constant regardless of how we feel; an equilibrium whereby we can ‘rejoice’ even when we don’t feel like rejoicing.

 During some of my darkest times in life, I found real support in one of the Eucharistic Prayers we use in church, the opening words of which say this: “It is our duty and our joy, at all times and in all place, to give you thanks and praise…” And that is so liberating for me because through my darkest times in life, I have been given permission to rejoice sometimes out of joy, but more often out of duty.

 And the truth is that, in our darkest times, rejoicing in God may just be a duty not a joy and if that’s the case – that’s OK. It is our duty and our joy – and both of those are appropriate at different times in life.

 So if you are in a dark place right now, ‘Rejoice’ - not because you feel like rejoicing or because it is a joy to you but because, as a child of God, it remains your duty. And the hope we have is that, one day, some day soon, your duty will become a joy once more.

 ‘Rejoice with Jerusalem!’ The important thing here isn’t just the word ‘rejoice’ but just as much emphasis is on the idea of ‘with Jerusalem’. Since Jerusalem represents the people of God, there is a poignant message in these three words.

 Because, for many of us, there is a temptation to stop coming to church when times get tough. How many of us, at one time or another, when our life circumstances have been really hard, have thought on a Sunday, ‘I can’t face going to church today’, ‘I cannot face the prospect of singing praise to a God I’m not even sure exists’, ‘I cannot even think about going there and pretending I’m happy when I’m not’.

 But it is completely counter-productive to stop coming to church when we go through difficult times and when our faith is feeling weak, because it is as such times as this when we need the fellowship the most. It is at times such as this when we need to support of the community the most.

 We need church because we need the heat of faith that is generated when we are together.

 So there is a pragmatic logic about this verse in Isaiah: “Rejoice with Jerusalem!” Even when life feels hopeless or your faith feels weak, “Rejoice with Jerusalem!” - and we will sustain each other in our love one for another.

 But even after all this, we are still left with a big question to answer: But if life does seem difficult at the moment, why should you rejoice? Isn’t that just living in denial of what *is*? Isn’t that just sticking your head in the sand and hoping the problems will go away?

 I don’t think so - and these words from Isaiah give us some reasons why:

 First, even though we may be in difficult times right now, we need to set that in the context of God’s wider provision for us. The truth is that God cares for us and provides for us, body, mind and spirit. Verse 11: “You will enjoy prosperity, like a child at her mother’s breast”. That is such an intimate image, isn’t it? God providing for us like a mother breastfeeding her baby. Everything we need for this body, everything we need for this life, God will provide as he feeds us and nourishes us and cares for us. Life may be tough for you or me right now – or we may have had tough times in the past - but when we put that in the context of our life thus far, we are aware that God has always walked with us and met us in our need.

 At the heart of the worship life of the people of Israel to whom this passage was written was the Passover Meal. And the Passover Meal was a long liturgy recounting all that God had done for them in the past - all his blessings, all his provision, all his comfort through the tough times. And the people of Israel knew what it was to suffer hardship and rejection and betrayal and yet, in the midst of their suffering, they never lost sight of the Big Picture, which was God’s constant love for them.

 We don’t have the Passover Meal in the Christian Church in the same way but we do have Holy Communion, which we will receive together in a few minutes - and the purpose is the same. As we receive bread and wine, we are reflecting back on God’s provision for us and the way in which, through the death of Jesus Christ, we can receive healing and peace and wholeness of life; a healing of memories, a restoration of the years that the locusts have eaten and hope for the future in his loving care.

 Taking Holy Communion is not a sign and symbol of how we feel about God so much as a sign and symbol of what God has done – and continues to do – for us.

 Receiving Communion is not dependent on how we feel: it’s dependent on God’s grace to us. And so we come to receive Communion – not because we feel like it - we come to receive Communion – not because we think we are worthy - we come to receive Communion because it is an act of obedience in response to the provision of God for us.

 Do you think you are unworthy to receive the bread and the wine? You are!

 Do you think you don’t know enough to receive the bread and wine? You don’t!

 Do you fear you will never be good enough to receive the bread and wine? You won’t!

 That’s exactly why you should come and receive it today - because each one of us is less than we should be but God is so much more than we could ever imagine. And so we are utterly reliant on the grace and mercy of God, which this sacrament symbolises to us

 First then, we rejoice because God promises to provide for our every need. Second, we rejoice because God promises to comfort us, verse 13: “You shall be comforted in Jerusalem as a mother comforts her child.”

 Comfort is so deeply needed by so many of us and it is one of the things that God promises to us over and over and over again in Scripture. Psalm 23: ‘your staff and rod, they comfort me’. Isaiah 51: ‘I am he who comforts you’. Matthew 5: ‘Blessed are they who mourn, for they shall be comforted’. John 14: ‘The Father will send the Holy Spirit, the Comforter’. We could go on…

 The truth is that, in God, we have a promise of comfort that will reach into our deepest darkness, our deepest anxieties, our deepest fear. And so, in anticipation of receiving that, we are able to Rejoice.

 And, finally, the passage ends with a beautiful phrase, verse 14: “When you see this happen, you will be glad…”

 Christian hope is not just pie-in-the-sky. Christian hope is tangible, it is pragmatic, it is real, it is for the here and now. The provision of God, the comfort of God, is something for us to actually experience in the roughness and instability of our own lives. The provision of God, the comfort of God is for each one of us to receive and experience as a present experience and, as these words from Isaiah say, “When you see this happen, you will be glad…”

 There are times in our lives when it is difficult to find hope, when it is difficult to rejoice. There are times in our lives when it is hard to see past our own failings or negative experiences. But, in the midst of all that, God promises to provide for us, God promises to comfort us. And we shall see that happen and we shall be glad. And then we can join with Job who, in chapter 19, proclaimed: “I know that my redeemer lives! And, in the end, he will come to my defence. Even after my skin is eaten by disease, while still in this body, I will see God. I will see him with my own eyes and he will not be a stranger.”

 Even in the depths of despair, we have every reason to rejoice. Because God is good and the promise of God to us is good.

 So I see to each one us today, whatever our life circumstances today: “Rejoice with Jerusalem! God will comfort you as a mother comforts her child…and you will be glad.” Amen.