

# THE EMMAUS SERIES

## *3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent, Year C*

Zephaniah 3:14-18

Philippians 4:4-7

Luke 3:10-18

## He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire

In today's gospel reading we continue Luke's account of the mission of John, the precursor of the Saviour. It reflects the life of a community that has come to recognize that, though the final moment of God's plan has come through the Risen Lord's Paschal Mystery, how that moment will unfold in the world's history is God's secret. They know that they must get on with their ordinary lives. Luke presents the preaching of John as 'Good News', foreshadowing important elements in the teaching of Jesus himself. It is 'tax collectors' and 'soldiers' – representing those looked down upon by respectable society in old Israel – who are open to John's message of repentance: the very ones who will respond to the message of Jesus. 'What must we do?' they ask John. It is not an easy question to ask with a humble sincerity that is open to hearing the truth. It reminds us of Advent's call to a deeper conversion and commitment. Luke's community remembers how John replied to this question, as calling them to get on with their ordinary lives, asking themselves whether they recognize Christ himself in their needy brothers and sisters, and whether they serve the Lord by the integrity with which they carry out their role in life.

Traditionally, the liturgy of the Third Sunday of Advent overflows with the theme of the joy of believing. This is one of Luke's favourite themes, and the gospel reading's reference to the 'feeling of anticipation' John's preaching aroused, and his foretelling of the Lord who 'will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire' chime in with this theme. Clearly, our liturgy's other readings have been chosen with this tradition in mind. 'I want you to be happy, always happy in the Lord', Paul writes to the Philippians; and he recommends practical ways that lead to authentic happiness 'in the Lord': tolerance towards those whose ways are not our own, and a prayer that unites trust in the Lord for the future with thanksgiving for his many blessings in the past. No doubt, taking seriously his faith in the one who has baptized us 'with the Holy Spirit and fire' has given Paul a personal experience of the 'peace' of which he speaks, the peace that only God can give. Something has gone wrong if our faith never brings us deep joy. Joy is the experience of what we were made for. The faith that the Baptist heralded, the faith that is the gift of the Risen Lord, and the faith that unites Luke's community and so many other communities after them, is a personal knowledge of God's love and mercy. It brings a joy and peace 'that the world cannot give' (Jn 14:27). Even for old Israel, as our first reading from the prophet Zephaniah reminds us, joy was one of the hallmarks of authentic faith. In this astounding text, the prophet calls the people to 'rejoice' with all their hearts, because 'the Lord' of Israel's hopes is 'in their midst', victorious, 'renewing them by his love'. Their joy should mingle with the Lord's own rejoicing, as he 'dances with shouts of joy over them'. This text is doubly appropriate in these weeks of Advent – its words ('Rejoice, daughter of Zion, the Lord, your God is in your midst') may well have inspired Luke's Annunciation narrative.

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