

Gaudete Homily

[Br. David Scarpa](#)

Fr. John Buckley, Parish Priest of Our Lady Queen of Apostles, Bishop Waltham, invited the author to make an appeal on behalf of Bethlehem University and to incorporate it in a homily for the Third Sunday in Advent

This is Gaudete Sunday, that special day in Advent when we express our joy and gratitude to the Lord for the privilege of being Christians and looking forward in faith and hope to the Coming of the Lord into our world.

The Prophet Isaiah in the First Reading tells us that 'The Spirit of the Lord has been given to (him).' The Spirit of the Lord has been given to each of us. We are consecrated, or anointed – made holy to the Lord, by our Baptism. The Spirit is the creative breath of life that we read about at the beginning of the Bible.

The prophet is sent to bring good news to the poor, to bind up hearts that are broken; so are we. Isn't that what goes on everyday in our families – binding up broken hearts? Jesus identifies himself with this prophesy of Isaiah and so should we. The prophet's mission includes proclaiming liberty to captives and freedom to those in prison. On Friday I received a Christmas message from Br Joseph, one of the Brothers at Bethlehem University. This is what he wrote:

In thinking about Christmas and the coming of Jesus to us in Bethlehem this year, I am consumed by thoughts of the 'wall' and restrictions of movement. On my frequent walks around the old town of Bethlehem, I walk through one of the two still existing gates into the ancient walled city of Bethlehem. Those walls protected the citizens from robbers and marauders, necessary in those days. I am certain that Mary and Joseph would have had no problem entering the little town of Bethlehem. Today a 25 ft. high concrete wall now surrounds the City of Bethlehem, the *Apartheid* wall as the Palestinians call it. But that is another story. This wall is not a protection from robbers and marauders but rather makes Bethlehem into a prison, prevent-

ing its citizens from leaving to enter Jerusalem, the centre of Christianity.

This restriction of movement that Br. Joseph mentions has serious implications for the Faculty, students and staff at Bethlehem University. The university authorities have several ways of dealing with the problem. One is mentioned in an article, 'If you don't come to the University, the University comes to you' on the university's current web page. The Faculty of Health-Care Sciences could not ensure that all of its students from the northern West Bank could reach Bethlehem for their classes, having to negotiate their way through as many as ten checkpoints, at any one of which, they could be turned back. A small annex was built in the village of Qubeibe near Ramallah where 32 undergraduates from the Nursing Department now follow classes. This strategy was first used more than a decade ago for students in Gaza. Now it is necessary over much of the West Bank too so that the educational process, so vitally important to the Palestinians, can continue.

To return to the readings – we are invited to rejoice with Mary in the Responsorial Psalm. She is consecrated in a very special way because the Word of God is made flesh in her as her son, Jesus, her Saviour and ours, the Messiah, the anointed One.

St. Paul in his Letter to the Thessalonians, tells us to be happy and thankful all the time because this is what God expects us to be. Why? Because we are related to the Risen Christ and that is what identifies us as Christians. We are thereby challenged to respond to the Spirit of Jesus' Creative breath of Life.

John the Baptist is sent as a witness to speak for the light (another metaphor from the Creation story at the beginning of the Bible). He too challenges us to be creative witnesses, to proclaim that, in whatever chaotic wilderness of a world we find ourselves, we can straighten it out, make good out of evil.

As most of you know I am a religious Brother, belonging to a teaching Congregation founded in

1680 by a Canon of the Cathedral of Rheims, John Baptist de La Salle, Patron Saint of teachers. He bore witness to the light and brought freedom to the youngsters imprisoned in the misery of ignorance and exploitation that was their lot in the slums of his city. John Baptist gathered a group of men around him and trained them to be good Christian teachers. Together they consecrated themselves, in a new kind of religious life, to respond to the educative needs of children throughout France.

In 1875 the Franciscans in Palestine and the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem urged the De La Salle Brothers to open schools in the Holy Land. Their requests were supported by the Sacred Congregations for the Propagation of the Faith. The Brothers therefore established a school inside the Old City of Jerusalem and in Haifa, Jaffa, Nazareth, and, in 1893 in Bethlehem. Here the Palestinian Brothers were trained to become good Christian teachers. Having satisfied the need for primary and secondary education, the local church in the Holy Land longed for an institution of Higher Education. In 1964 Pope Paul VI came on pilgrimage to the Holy Land and the Palestinian Church sought the Holy Father's help in establishing a University in the Holy Land. In response to this demand and encouraged by the Pope, the De La Salle Brothers opened Bethlehem University in 1973 on the site of the

1893 building. Since then, in spite of wars, closures, military attacks, the University has grown and developed. Copies of a recent press release, concerned mainly with the appointment of the new Vice Chancellor to Bethlehem University, are available at the back of the church. It gives you some idea of the progress now being made at Bethlehem University.

It was my privilege to teach at Bethlehem University from 1990 until 2005. I was deeply impressed by the courage and determination of my colleagues and students who risked fines, imprisonment and sometimes even death to continue the educative process. Many students cannot afford to pay their fees. A university is a very expensive establishment to run. The University depends on the generosity of donors from all around the world, in spite of credit crunches. It continues to be a wonderful oasis of peaceful co-operation between Christians and Moslems, of academic excellence and research that benefits the whole country.

The parishioners of Our Lady Queen of Apostles have always given generously and I know you will continue to do so. In the land of the prophet Isaiah, the land of Mary and John the Baptist, of Jesus and St. Paul, the mission to bring the good news to the poor must go on. You can help that mission.

Thank you.