

1. It is just two week until Christmas, and our readings for today are filled with joy. We read from the prophet Zephaniah who is telling his people that they should shout for joy because God has turned away their enemies and is now in their midst, renewing them with his love and singing joyfully because of them. Quite a claim there—that God sings for joy because of his love for his people! And Paul, writing to the Christians in Philippi has the same message. “Rejoice,” he tells them, because the Lord is near.

Therefore, throw all your cares and anxieties on God, making your requests known to him in prayer and petition. If you do that, he tells them, the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Such beautiful words! Why don't we try to live them?

2. The Gospel has the same message, although in a slightly more hidden way. John is telling the people that the messiah is coming and will separate the wheat from the chaff. And the people are open to John's teaching and simply ask: “What should we do?” John's answer to each group that approaches him is very specific. To the tax collectors he says: Stop collecting more than is prescribed. To the soldiers he says: Don't practice extortion, don't

accuse falsely and be satisfied with your wages. And to the people in general he says: If you have clothing and food, share them with those who have them. So simple, isn't it.

3. How can we tie the themes of these three readings with the Mass? That is my question since I have been talking about the Mass for the last two Sundays. So far I have said that the Mass is the action of a community and as such is also historical in character. It is celebrated in the present but looks back to the Last Supper and then up to the Lord in glory, the Lord who can be present both to the present and the past because he is now beyond time and space.

4. The most obvious connection between the Mass and today's readings is the fact that they both emphasize the Lord's presence here and now. The readings are full of joy because they believe that the Lord is very near, indeed is in our midst. And we know that the most fundamental assertion of Catholic theology with respect to the Mass is its belief that Jesus is present to us in the consecrated bread and wine. Therefore both the readings for today and the Mass share a common theme. Both say the same thing to us: The Lord is in your midst.

5. At their annual meeting last month in Washington, the USC bishops put out a document on receiving the Eucharist. The immediate occasion for it was the hue and cry that went up from some Catholics two years ago about presidential candidates who claimed to be Catholic and went to communion but who defended legal and political positions which were contrary to Catholic teaching. But the bishops' document goes beyond that starting point. It warns all of us about becoming too blasé about receiving the Eucharist. And that is of course is a good thing to do. But who of us can really take in what we say we are doing in the Eucharist? We believe we are communicating with Jesus himself, who is one with God, who is the Son of God, when we take communion. It is an intimate as we can get without seeing him face to face. Yes, he is veiled, hidden under the appearances of bread and wine. But it is he who gives himself to us in this simple way. If we realized what we are doing, and if we then chose to do it on a regular basis, our lives would have to change. We would really become the children of God. No, not angels, but more than angels. People of flesh and blood who are nevertheless living good lives, indeed, divine lives of faith and hope and love. Yes, we must be more conscious of what we are doing when we accept the Lord's body and blood at Mass. We must realize we are making a commitment to the Lord.

We are promising him to live our lives as his companions, that is, as those who break bread with him.