

## Fourth Sunday in Lent (Laetare Sunday), 11<sup>th</sup> March 2018

There are a number of Sundays throughout the year which are named after the first word of the Introit, like today of course: *Laetare* Sunday. The Introit consists of an antiphon and then the beginning of a psalm (originally a whole psalm); the antiphon as a general rule being a verse taken from the psalm itself and repeated again at the end. Today's antiphon is therefore one of the exceptions; since it comes not from the psalm, one hundred and twenty one in this case, "*Laetatus sum* (I rejoiced)", but rather from the last chapter, chapter sixty-six (v. 10), of the prophet Isaiah.

The psalm, *Laetatus sum*, is absolutely ideal for an Introit, which was intended as the music for the procession to the altar: "I rejoiced at the things that were said to me: We shall go into the house of the Lord" (Ps 121:1), and so on. If I were to use a different translation, you probably would recall a certain historic occasion, together with a particular piece of music: "I was glad when they said unto me: We will go into the house of the Lord". Westminster Abbey, 1953, might come to mind.

Although the antiphon beginning with "*Laetare* (Rejoice)" comes from Isaiah rather than from the Psalm, *Laetatus sum* ("I rejoiced", or "I was glad", if you prefer), it is quite obvious why they have been placed together. This theme of rejoicing is also present in today's Epistle, from St Paul to the Galatians: "*Laetare, sterilis* (Rejoice, thou barren)" (4:27). Not only is this another occurrence of the word "*Laetare* (Rejoice)" but it is yet another quotation from the prophecy of Isaiah, this time from chapter fifty-four (v. 1).

St Paul is as such quoting directly from the Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint; which makes sense, given that he was writing in Greek. But if you were, however, to look up the passage concerned from Isaiah in the Latin Vulgate and the Douay-Rheims, you would find "*Lauda, sterilis* (Give praise, O thou barren)" rather than "*Laetare, sterilis* (Rejoice, thou barren)", this is because St Jerome, who was responsible for the Vulgate, was working from the Hebrew instead of the Greek text of the Old Testament.

This is all rather technical, I know, yet the same is in fact the case with regard to today's Introit antiphon, "*Laetare, Jerusalem* (Rejoice, O Jerusalem)" (Is 66:10), also of course from Isaiah, as well as being about the city of Jerusalem; since this was what "thou barren" was referring to. It appears, after a bit of research, that "*Laetare, Jerusalem*" is not actually from the Vulgate but from the earlier Old Latin version, which used the Greek Septuagint instead of the Hebrew Scriptures: all this points to the fact that the Introit is of very ancient origin, considering that the Latin Vulgate was written towards the end of the fourth century. In the same way, the antiquity of certain elements in the Mass, the *Gloria in excelsis* and the *Pater noster*, can be confirmed by their being from that older Latin version, the *Vetus Latina*.

The Vulgate and the Douay-Rheims version for "*Laetare, Jerusalem* (Rejoice, O Jerusalem)", by the way, is "*Laetamini cum Jerusalem* (Rejoice with Jerusalem)". Yes, a fairly insignificant difference and, given the ambiguity of the Hebrew text, I can see why there is this slight difference. Yet, it more strongly indicates our involvement in

rejoicing, though the question might well be raised: and what is there to rejoice about? Today's station church, Santa Croce in Gerusalemme, which represents Jerusalem in Rome, indeed shows us what Jerusalem means to us and what she might be rejoicing over: Santa Croce, the 'Holy Cross'.



The next stational liturgy in this church will in fact be on Good Friday. It might seem somewhat paradoxical to be rejoicing over the Cross; but, as we know, our faith is full of paradox: it is of course through death that we enter into life and the resurrection. The Cross was itself anchored on a hill, Mount Calvary. In today's Gospel, the multiplication of the loaves and fishes in St John, Jesus is observed to go up another mountain (cf. Jn 6:3). And at the end of the miracle, he "fled again into the mountain"; because, we are told: "he knew that they would come to take him by force and make him king" (Jn 6:15).

On Good Friday, at Santa Croce in Gerusalemme, we will again hear from St John's Gospel, and hear about Christ being crucified on Mount Calvary. Here the people have finally been able to "make him king", though probably not in the way in which they originally intended! Over Christ's head, crowned with thorns, on the Cross was written: "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews" (Jn 19:19). In addition to the True Cross, there is among the relics of the Passion at Santa Croce this 'title', the *Titulus Crucis* ("Title of the Cross"), as it is known. The relic itself bears witness to the inscription as recorded in the same Gospel, that of St John, and to its being written in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin (cf. Jn 19:20).

The barrenness and desolation of the Cross was akin to that of the city Jerusalem, "thou barren" (Ga 4:27), as she is called by the prophet Isaiah in today's Epistle; yet, to quote the Preface of the Holy Cross: "whence came death, thence also life might rise again". Let us rejoice then "with Jerusalem" (Is 66:10), our now fruitful mother; seeing that the tree of death has become for us the Tree of Life, *eternal Life*.