Today’s Collect is so honest and wise. It speaks of the ‘sins and wickedness’ by which we are ‘sore let and hindered’. And doesn’t it feel like that sometimes? We have the best of intentions, but it’s like having cast iron boots on, we get stuck in the pettiness or jealousy or superficiality or grudge-bearing or whatever else it is that so easily becomes our default mode. (Maybe especially when specific relatives or familiar patterns emerge of Christmas…) And so, the Collect prays that we might have God’s grace and mercy to speed us on. Hold that prayer – ‘God give me grace and mercy’ as your colleagues get more stressed and less useful. ‘God give me grace and mercy’ as endless negotiations over travel arrangements or dinner plans, or UN style interventions are made in family politics: ‘God give me grace and mercy’.

And there’s more helpful advice from St Paul in today’s Epistle: ‘rejoice’. ‘rejoice’. Not with a mad fixed grin, not with a nauseating fake jollity (I can’t bear it when Christians do that). But rejoice because truly we have reason to rejoice. ‘God was man in Palestine and lives today in bread and wine’. God has become one of us, to bring us home to heaven forever, and be with us in His Spirit, in Scripture and prayer, and the Eucharist, in the beauty of human love.
– to be with us in these ways and more - until our pilgrimage is done and we enter eternal joys. Rejoice, because however weird, wonderful or awful life is, we have hope set before us. ‘The Lord is at hand’ says St Paul. He is with us now, and He will come again in the glorious and majestic fullness of His Kingdom.

So be ‘careful for nothing’ says the Apostle today. Not ‘don’t care’, but don’t be full of cares, worries. And to stop life getting too much, pray!, says St Paul. Have a relationship with God that actually undergirds your life. Begin and end the day in prayer, chat to God during the day, take God in with you to meetings and conversations, at family meals and as you pass through the streets. St Paul is trying to help us make God a constant companion; so that we will (despite life’s ups and downs) find something, even in this life, of the ‘peace which passeth understanding’.

In these last days of this holy season of Advent, we are given a Collect that takes our human condition seriously (just in time for Christmas and all that comes with it!) and that bids us ask for God’s grace and mercy as we do. And an Epistle that doesn’t allow us to get lost in woe, but reminds us, that whatever the immediate realities of life, we have real reasons to be people of joy.

Last week the Gospel held St John the Baptist before our eyes. The forerunner of Jesus’s adult ministry, is, in the liturgy, the forerunner for His incarnation too. Last week I
said that St John is a patron saint of our times. How he sat in
the darkness of prison and asked of Jesus ‘are you the one
for whom we have been waiting?’
Today the questions are turned on him. ‘Are you the
Messiah?’ They ask him. ‘No.’ ‘Are you Elias (Elijah the
Prophet)?’
Then and now people are very keen on labels and
pigeonholes. In our time and part of the world today we
seem obsessed with categorising people. Christmas too is
full of expectations – your Christmas should look like this or
that (according to this TV depiction or that set of family
prejudices). Social pigeonholes and boxes that we are all
expected to squeeze ourselves into, and feel terrible about
ourselves if we don’t.
What an awful lot of demands we place on ourselves and
each other, all in the name of joy?
And yet we know that these little boxes we push ourselves
and each other into are not the sources of joy. Rejoice! Joy is
to do all the lovely things at Christmas, knowing that they
are simply there to reflect the earth shattering reality that
‘God was man in Palestine’ for love of us, to love us and
save us, and that that same God ‘lives today in bread and
wine’ until we go home to Him. All the presents and songs
and pigs in blankets and bottles of Chateau Neuf de Pape
don’t point to themselves, but to Him. Our Christmas
celebrations aren’t the source of our joy, they’re a lovely
reflection of it.
Back to the Baptist to end. They asked him, ‘are you this?’ or ‘are you that?’ Desperate to put him in a box. And he said ‘no’. ‘I am the voice’ (not a BBC talent show) but the startling reality of one who’s life is defined by being ‘not He’. A life that didn’t point to itself (do you see the link?). A life that wasn’t seeking a fake and shiny social media-ready family Christmas. A life that wasn’t seeking to be rich or clever or beautiful or ‘successful’ (eugh, whatever that means?).

Remember that prayer with which we started ‘God give me grace and mercy’. A way of plugging into God in normal life. St John’s was a life so plugged into God that he found and lived out real joy. A life that found the peace which does, really does, pass all understanding. As a patron for our times, lets have a ‘St John the Baptist Christmas’ this year.

Let us pray for each other now.

‘God give us grace and mercy’.

‘God keep us plugged into the deep and real sources of joy; and to enjoy the fun of Christmas as outpourings of those truths – rather than trying to make them an end in themselves’.

‘And God, in us and each other and those with whom we’ll spend Christmas this year, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord’ who comes with power and love, bearing the gift of life itself, the best present we will ever receive.’ Amen.