A sermon for the Cathedral Eucharist at Wells Cathedral, preached on Sunday 14 December 2025 by the Reverend Edward Day, Cathedral Curate.

Fools Shall Not Err Therein

I'm glad I was never a teenage girl.

To be more specific, I'm glad I was never a teenage girl attending an American High School. Now, I'll admit, almost all I know about the life of teenage girls comes from television shows and films. If these films from the '90s and '00s are anything to go by, it is a terrifying existence. A landscape of complicated cliques and cafeteria politics. A minefield of social hierarchy and backhanded compliments. What to wear? What to eat? Where to sit? Who to be friends with? All questions that will determine your position in this fragile ecosystem. It's a hard existence. Dog-eat-dog. Or, teenager-eat-teenager. Will you be accepted or outcast? Will you be considered cool or not? Will Regina George let you sit at her table? When I say I have learnt from '90s and '00s films, what I actually mean is that almost all my understanding comes from the 2004 comedy *Mean Girls*. A film that pokes fun at these social dynamics and the cult of the popular girls in school.

Why am I thinking about the film *Mean Girls*, you might reasonably ask? Well, in the film, the popular girls (or 'The Plastics' as they're known) have some strict rules to remain in their club. Don't wear a tank top two days in a row. You can only wear your hair in a ponytail once a week. You can only wear jeans or track pants on Friday. You can't buy a skirt without asking your friends first if it looks good on you. And possibly the most famous of all: on Wednesdays we wear pink.

It's a bit of a far cry from a fictional school in Illinois, but it seems we have a very similar rule ourselves. It's not quite pink on Wednesdays, but, on the Third Sunday of Advent, we wear rose.

On this Third Sunday of Advent, also commonly known as Gaudete Sunday, we light the rose candle on our Advent wreath and we wear rose vestments. Why? Because here we are, halfway through our Advent journey of preparation to celebrate the coming of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. In the soberness of our reflective Advent pilgrimage, the liturgical colour lightens from purple into a softer hue and we are invited to rejoice. Gaudete!

But what do we have to rejoice about? Rejoicing may not always feel terribly easy. We may know of lots of joys and reasons to hope, yet still find the darkness of our world daunting. How can we rejoice when we look at our world and see conflict and war? When winter exposes coldness, poverty, and loneliness? When we hear the Christian message of love being distorted for hatred and exclusion? When we continue to patiently wait for the Second Coming of Christ and for the Kingdom of God to be established? How can we rejoice?

In the Gospel according to St Matthew, Jesus Christ speaks words of illuminating hope into a period of division. As we have heard, Christ encourages St John the Baptist while he is imprisoned by Herod the Tetrarch, saying, '*Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them'*. This is why we rejoice. Not because our world is perfect, far from it. We rejoice because Christ has entered it. We rejoice because the light of Christ brings hope.

Yet, from both of our readings this morning, I must admit my principal inspiration to rejoice does not come from the Gospel but instead from a single verse in our reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. Chapter 35, verse eight. We read, '*A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveller, not even fools, shall go astray*'.

'[N]o traveller, not even fools, shall go astray'. To me, that is a comfort I can rejoice in. It is an illustration of the unending wideness of God's mercy and love. It is a sign of His universal love. No traveller, not even fools, shall go astray. This, I believe, is our reason to rejoice in our journey of Advent, no matter how foolish we inevitably will be, God will always embrace us. As we know from St Paul's Letter to the Romans, there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God (Romans 8.31-end). Nothing. No traveller, not even fools, shall go astray.

This single verse, however, is even more interesting if we look at other translations of the Holy Scriptures. In the New Revised Standard Version (NRSVue), of formal equivalence, that is most often used in this Cathedral, we hear, '*no traveller, not even fools, shall go astray'*. In the English Standard Version (ESV) we hear, '*It shall belong to those who walk on the way; even if they are fools, they shall not go astray'*. However, these comforting words are not found in all translations. For example, in the New International Version (NIV), of dynamic equivalence and very popular in evangelical Protestantism, the verse instead reads, '*And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness; it will be for those who walk on that Way. The unclean will not journey on it; wicked fools will not go about on it*'. Quite a striking difference. Fools will not go on the way versus no fool shall go astray. It challenges our reason to rejoice. Fortunately, if we look

to the Hebrew Aleppo Codex (והיה שם מסלול ודרך ודרך הקדש יקרא לה—לא יעברנו טמא והוא למו הלך דרך ואוילים לא יתעו), the Greek Septuagint (ἐκεῖ ἔσται ὁδὸς καθαρὰ καὶ ὁδὸς ἁγία κληθήσεται, καὶ οὐ μὴ παρέλθῃ ἐκεῖ ἀκάθαρτος, οὐδὲ ἔσται ἐκεῖ ὁδὸς ἀκάθαρτος· οἱ δὲ διεσπαρμένοι πορεύσονται ἐπ᾽ αὐτῆς καὶ οὐ μὴ πλανηθῶσιν), and even St Jerome's Latin Vulgate (et erit ibi semita et via et via sancta vocabitur non transibit per eam pollutus et haec erit nobis directa via ita ut stulti non errent per eam), we find again those comforting words that fools shall not go astray.

Yet I don't think this difference in translation is just an interesting aside or pedantic biblical studies. I think this matters immensely because it demonstrates how dangerous our handling of the Scriptures can be. This matters because it highlights the danger of what happened yesterday in London. Namely, *Tommy Robinson*'s (Stephen Yaxley-Lennon) carol 'service' to "put the Christ back into Christmas". We see how the Scriptures can be twisted into a weapon. Turned into a banner for exclusion, for nationalism appropriating the imagery and language of Christianity. When the Word of God is used to divide, to diminish, and to draw lines between *them* and *us*. It is nothing more than a racist and xenophobic distortion of our loving and inclusive Gospel. '*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him*' (John 3.16-17).

Christianity is not an exclusive gateway for the pure nor for the white; it is a path of loving mercy and salvation for all people. No traveller, not even fools, shall go astray. God's love encompasses us all in our shared human foolishness. In my own foolishness, in your foolishness, and in the foolishness of those who preach hatred, we are all united together by God's immeasurable love.

And so, in the face of hate, in the face of fear, in the face of attempts to exclude., let us instead rejoice in love. On this Gaudete Sunday, we are called to rejoice, not to deny the pain of the world but to resist against it. Rejoice in the love of the Incarnate God who comes to walk beside us. Rejoice in the Christ who refuses all human attempts to limit God's mercy. Rejoice for the Lord's Highway is wide enough for us all. Rejoice that Jesus Christ does not exclude or seek to build cliques but invites us all to sit at His Holy Table as we are. Rejoice this Advent that no traveller, not even fools, shall go astray.

The Reverend Edward Day, Cathedral Curate 14 December 2025