

December 15th 2024 - Archbishop Geoff Smith

Isaiah 35.1-10

Ps 100

Phil 2.12-18

John 16.16-24

The theme for today is **joy**. Joy is the third of the themes of the Sundays of Advent after hope and peace. That's why we use the rose-coloured candle in the Advent wreath today rather than a violet one.

The definition of joy in the dictionary is: great happiness, or the emotion of great delight or happiness caused by something exceptionally good or satisfying.

What causes or brings about this feeling of happiness or satisfaction can be all sorts of things. Good news about family or friends. Praise or good feedback from work. Success in an application, maybe for a job. Or perhaps solving a problem or difficulty. Or maybe getting good medical news for ourselves or someone close to us. There are lots of things that can bring us joy.

On this basis, joy is something that comes and goes and depends very much on what is going on for us. If we are not having success, if we get bad news, if things aren't going too well with our family, then chances are we may not have much joy in our life if these are the foundations of our joy.

But as Christians we have very good news. Not only can we have joy through all those external factors, we can have joy all the time no matter what is going on in our life. That's good news because we all want to be joyful. We all want that deep sense of peace and purpose, not as a fleeting emotion, but as a constant part of our life.

The Bible readings today help us to understand how we can have this lasting joy in our life.

The first reading from the prophet Isaiah looks forward to a time when the people of Israel, who are in exile in Babylon, will be returned to their own land, Israel.

Isaiah understands that it will be the Lord who brings his people out of exile and back to their land. And what will be the response? Here are a couple of examples from the reading.

“Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy”.

And a second quote from the reading: ‘and the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away’.

The joy of the people in those verses was based on what God would do, not what the people would do. God and God’s action was the foundation of their joy.

The second reading from psalm 100 is also helpful. Verse 1 of the psalm says, ‘O shout to the Lord in triumph all the earth; ‘serve the Lord with gladness and come before his face with songs of joy’.

Why do the people come before the Lord with songs of joy? What’s the reason? The psalm gives us the answer- ‘know that the Lord is God: it is he who has made us and we are his; we are his people and the sheep of his pasture. For the Lord is good, his loving mercy is forever: his faithfulness throughout all generations’.

So according to psalm 100 why can we have joy? Two reasons. First, because the Lord is God. The Lord is good, his loving mercy is forever, his faithfulness throughout all generations. So, our joy is based on who God is. What God is like. In other words, the character of God.

Because we know the Lord. Because we know that the Lord is good. Because we know that his loving mercy is for ever. Because we know that the Lord is faithful throughout all generations. We can that sense of peace and joy.

And the second reason for joy is that we are his, we are his people and the sheep of his pasture.

So, we can have joy because of what God is like-God’s character. And we can have joy because of our relationship with God. We are his, we are his people and the sheep of his pasture.

In the Bible the reason for joy, the foundation for joy is not us and what we have done, or the ups and downs of our life, but the foundation for joy is God. What God is like and what God has done and will do.

We know that God loves the whole creation—that's what we celebrate at Christmas. We know that the death and resurrection of Jesus means forgiveness of sins for us individually and is the guarantee that the kingdom of God will come, despite what we see going on around us. Our baptism means we are joined to Christ's death and resurrection, so our resurrection is also guaranteed. Our baptism means we are adopted sons and daughters of God.

These are present and ultimate realities. And these are the basis for Christian joy. They mean that no matter what happens to us we can have confidence in God. No matter what our circumstances we know that God loves us and is with us. We know that our future and the ultimate future of the world is secure.

One of my favourite verses in the Bible—Romans 8.28 says, 'We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose'.

We love God, and we know what God is like therefore our joy is not based on what happens to us or how we are feeling on the day, but is based on God. God is the foundation.

This is an individual perspective but there is also a community focus to this. One of the richest letters in the New Testament is Paul's letter to the Christians in the city of Philippi. Philippians 1.6, says this: 'I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ'.

It's important to remember that Paul was writing not to an individual but to a church, a congregation. The 'you' when Paul says, 'I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you', is plural. Paul was confident that the one who began a good work among the congregation at Philippi will bring that work to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. By the time of the second coming, Jesus' return, in other words.

Even though Paul was writing to a particular congregation, it is safe to apply those words to all Christian congregations.

This has something very important to say to us here at St Lukes. I don't have to tell you that the church in Australia is going through a challenging time. We

are not the flavour of the month. Overall across the church the numbers of people identifying as Christian is in decline. Congregations overall are ageing. It feels like we are under pressure.

In this context it is very easy to be glum. To get a bit despondent and feel a bit hopeless. It's also easy for us to circle the wagons and protect what we have got. In other words become inward looking.

It's worth remembering that the early Christians that Paul was writing to were not the flavour of the month in the Roman empire. They were a tiny group. Probably less than 50 people. Paul wrote this letter from prison, so he wasn't exactly in a great situation himself.

But despite his situation and the fragile situation of the Philippian Christians, Paul says: I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ'.

So what does that say to us?

This is Gods' church. St Lukes Modbury, and the Christian Church in Australia. God has begun a good work in this church. God will bring it to completion. We can have confidence in God. And that has two implications. We can have joy not despondency in the future of the church. And we can get on with the work God has called us to do, confident in God. Confident in Gods leading. Confident in God working among us to bring his good work to completion. And this, no matter what seems to be going on around us.

Joy is a great thing for us. It's good for us. Joy is good for our mental wellbeing and physical health. But we want to have joy that is based on something solid and dependable and lasting. We don't want to be blown around by the vagaries of this life. Our joy comes from the character of God and God's love of us. No matter what happens, we know that God loves us, individually and collectively. God will work among us, individually and collectively. God is faithful and good.

That's the basis for our life. And from that basis comes a by-product. And that by-product is joy. We can't manufacture joy. We can't force joy. Joy comes because of who God is and our relationship with him.

What this means is that our focus on God is important, individually and collectively. Developing our relationship with and trust in and knowledge of God, individually and collectively is important. That's where joy will flow from.

Some time ago I came across an app for my phone called Lectio365. It is from the 24/7 prayer movement. Lectio365 is a free app. It doesn't ask for any personal information. There are no in-app purchases, and I don't get a commission each time it is downloaded by someone in the Diocese.

Lectio365 provides a devotion for morning and evening 365 days a year. Each devotion includes prayer, scripture and a reflection on the scripture. You can read the devotion on your phone or listen to it. If you listen to it, it takes 8-10 minutes.

Lectio365 provides a really great way to stay in touch with God and strengthen our relationship with God, that will lead to a clearer knowing of God, trust in God and joy from God.

I encourage you to give lectio365 a go for two weeks. If you don't like it-delete it. But I think you'll find it helpful.

We all want and need joy in our life. Joy is a by-product of a relationship with God who loves us. Who is completely trustworthy. Who is with us no matter what.