

## Joy to the world?

Here we are on the third Sunday in Advent, the Sunday when we focus on joy. If you're a regular attender here, you'll know that I often – too often, perhaps – say that joy is the most neglected part of the fruit of the spirit. But today, we get joy, full-on.

The first two weeks of advent, we looked at hope and peace, and finding hymns that fitted in with those themes, and that I had a reasonable confidence that we could sing together, was quite a challenge. As Christians, we often talk about hope and peace – but I found that we don't sing those themes so much.

Today, though, it was easy. We do know and sing songs about joy. Singing is generally a joyful experience – when we came back together after the Covid lockdowns, we longed to sing together, and when we finally could, well, what a joy that was.

Our reading from the book of Isaiah doesn't talk about singing, but it does talk about 'shouting for joy', because I think joy is something that almost always provokes a vocal response: Woohoo! Yippee! Yay! Isaiah tells us "The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy." (Isaiah 35:1-2)

The very land will shout for joy!

And "Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy." (Isaiah 35:5-6)

In some way, even those who can make no sound at all will shout for joy.

And the reading ends with "Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away." (Isaiah 35:10b)

So, as well as the shouts of joy going out, the sounds of sorrow and sadness and disappointment and fear will not be heard any more.

What a hope that is – what a future that is that we can look forward to. As John says in the book of Revelation (21:4) "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

But the truth is that we live with those things today: Sorrow, sadness, disappointment, fear, mourning, crying, pain... and of course death. We are all more fortunate than many people in the world today, but even so, our lives are not purely joyful.

Christmas is of course a time of great joy, but it's also a time that very sad for so many people.

For many people Christmas is a time of sadness, mourning, stress and frustration.

Sometimes it seems that Christmas has become an obligation and even become a competition – something that we must measure up to and get through. We have to get the food right. The decorations right. The presents right. The gatherings right. And if we don't get everything exactly right, then we've failed – Christmas will be a disaster.

Anecdotally, calls to Lifeline increase at this time of year. Some of those calls will be triggered by families – families forced together for “celebrations”, and some will be triggered by the absence of family, whether it’s through death, estrangement or even just distance.

People often experience a feeling of emptiness at this time of year. Things don’t measure up. People feel unfulfilled and unsatisfied. The grandchildren spent more time with the other grandparents than with me. My wife didn’t like the present I got her as much as I thought she would. My sister chose not to come to Christmas lunch. People didn’t appreciate all the effort I went to with the turkey. Whatever it is, it was just not right.

We are all richly blessed, but sometimes it’s hard to appreciate the blessings we have in the midst of our own and others’ expectations. So next year, we have to work harder to make Christmas perfect.

I was listening to a podcast this week from Geoff Stevenson, who’s the chair of the current Parramatta – Nepean Presbytery. He was talking about how he’d been invited to a community carols event, and asked to give a talk on the real meaning of Christmas. He accepted the invitation because it was a good thing to do, to share the good news of Christmas in amongst all the other things – the singing, the face painting, the food stalls, the jumping castle and of course Santa Claus. But the organisers asked him to speak – for no more than two or three minutes.

And when he spoke, he realised that very few people were listening. There was too much going on.

But Geoff contemplated the event afterwards, and pondered why the people were there. What had drawn people to the event during the busy time of year.

We have a family tradition of going to the St James’ King Street Carol Service the week before Christmas each year, and then going out for dinner, and then going to the St Mary’s Cathedral forecourt to see the lights. Both the St James’ Carol Service and the St Mary’s lights attract far more people than their regular services do. I’ve been to the regular St James mid-week service, and they get five or six people along.

Most churches get visitors around Christmas, don’t they? People who hardly ever set foot in church know the Christmas hymns, and enjoy singing them. We, who are in church week-to-week get to share our joy with them. And we get to experience their joy, too.

Geoff contemplated in his podcast, and I often contemplate too, that these things, whether it’s community carols or Christmas church services, are more than just entertainment events at Christmas time. More than just being part of community, too. People, who have something missing in their lives, can find that something – or at least get a pointer toward it.

Many people today are missing something in their lives, but they're not the first ones. Our reading from Isaiah told us about the desert, the parched land and the wilderness, of feeble hands and knees that give way, people who are blind, lame or mute, the fear of the ravenous lion and the sounds of sorrow and sighing.

But Isaiah tells us that that is going to change: Fear will be replaced with joy – not just the joy of a seasonal celebration, but lasting joy: Joy to the world, because the Lord has come.

God has come into the world, in Jesus. In that helpless baby whose birth in humble circumstances in a backwater town we'll celebrate in eleven days' time. We remember the words of the angel and whole host of heaven in Luke 2, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. <sup>11</sup>Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord... Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests."

And Jesus' arrival in history changes everything. The world, which was like a parched desert, will rejoice and blossom and burst into bloom, and water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs.

In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow. (Isaiah 35:6b-7)

Jesus' arrival changes everything – not literally, yet, obviously, but it does change our lives and how we relate to God. And this change brings joy; it lifts us to look beyond the things of the world. The joy we find in Jesus is not like getting a good present or sharing in a delicious meal – but it's joy that lasts and that is purposeful and meaningful. Isaiah says the Lord builds a highway, called the Way of Holiness. And it heads straight for Zion – the place where God and his people will dwell together.

This highway is for the redeemed. For the forgiven. For us. For us, and for all of those of all the generations that have been – and those yet to come – who have turned to Jesus and shared in the joy, that peace and that hope.

About six hundred odd years after Isaiah's prophecy, John the Baptist had started preparing the way of the Lord – that highway that the Isaiah spoke about. He was preparing the people for the arrival of the long-awaited Messiah. Calling them to repentance – calling them back to God. Symbolically washing them in the Jordan river.

He fell foul of Herod, and he was imprisoned. While he was in prison, news reached him of Jesus' preaching and his miracles. He sent some of his disciples to find out if Jesus really was the one that Isaiah had spoken of all those years before.

As we heard in our gospel reading today John's disciples asked Jesus, 'Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?' (Matthew 11:3)

Jesus didn't give a direct answer, but he gave an emphatic one: Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have

leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. (Matthew 11:4-5)

Jesus was fulfilling those prophecies of Isaiah. The blind saw, the lame walked and so on. Jesus was changing things – changing everything. The things of the fallen world were being pushed aside for the way that God intended things to be. No more blindness, no more disease, no more death. And what's more, that joyous news was being proclaimed to everyone. Including us today.

And including all the people of the world. They can hear that good news, and they can respond to it, and they can share in that joy, no matter what their circumstances may be.

When we turn to Jesus, Jesus who loved us so much that he would die for us, we can share in the joy he brings: The joy of his resurrection. The joy of his ascension. The joy of his kingdom being at hand. The joy of life everlasting. We won't always be happy, but we can always hold on to that joy.

We can share in that joy this Christmas, whether we're alone or with family or friends, whether we get great presents or none at all, whether we have a Christmas dinner with all the trimmings, or a humble meal. Ultimately, the joy of Christmas isn't tied up in those things, the joy is Jesus. I'm not a fan of using the phrase 'the reason for the season', but that's what it is, isn't it? It's not that we have to disregard the decorations and the presents and all the rest of it, we can still enjoy them, but God gave us all his son, Jesus. The gift of Jesus is forgiveness and salvation; and in that we can experience real and lasting – everlasting – joy.

Amen.