



Rev Helen Jacobi

Joy

Adent 3, Year C

Philippians 4:4-7

Luke 3:7-18

12 December 2021

Joy is today's advent theme. Joy.

"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice."

Paul writes about joy, gentleness, prayer, peace.

It all sounds very soothing.

The kind of feelings we long for after the anxiety and disruption of our year.

Despite the worries of this year and our recent lockdown we have known had plenty of moments of joy – meeting a friend or family member for a simple picnic; first hugs outside your bubble; having some at home time in peace and quiet; the birds and the walks.

At our place we have been watching a blackbird build a nest in a lime tree right outside our lounge window – it has given us such joy.

Joy does not equal a shallow type of happiness and joy does not mean the absence of pain and struggle.

Paul is writing to the people of Philippi from prison.

And yet he says – rejoice, always.

On the first Sunday of Advent we sang the hymn "Come thou long expected Jesus"

Come, thou long-expected Jesus,

born to set thy people free;

from our fears and sins release us;

let us find our rest in thee.

*Israel's strength and consolation,
hope of all the earth thou art;
dear desire of every nation,
joy of every longing heart.*

Joy of every longing heart - Charles Wesley – sums up so well that joy is an active thing, not a state we arrive at.

There are many things we long for, we can feel joy even while we long for something.

And our ultimate longing is to know the long expected Jesus.

So that's all good and nice

But then in the next moment this morning we hear the words of John the Baptist

“you brood of vipers”!

“who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”

Why do we have these two very contrasting readings?

Always on the third Sunday of Advent we have John the Baptist (and Luke's version is particularly colourful) and we always something from the epistles about the way we are to live out our Christian calling.

They stand together and in contrast, juxtaposed to unsettle us; and certainly designed to keep us challenged lest we lapse into the sentimentality of the Christmas story too soon.

The poor old crowd had gathered to hear John the Baptist hoping for some good news – they had heard this was the place to be – here they would be baptized and renewed – but when they get there they are told don't think just because you are descended from Abraham and Sarah that gives you any rights; and you are like trees that are going to be chopped down, roots and all.

Someone in the crowd bravely asks – well what then should we do? what possible hope is there?

And John's tone changes – oh actually there is lots you can do!

If you have two coats, share one with someone who has none; share your food too.

Ok – that we can do – Sharing our clothes, bringing them to the Mission or other op shops; sharing food with those in need through foodbanks and the City Mission; but also making food for friends who are ill or just because we love them – we can do that.

Then the tax collectors come – they were seen as very wicked – they colluded with the Romans and stole money for themselves.

John says – that is ok – just collect the agreed amount – cut out the extortion and you will be fine.

Today we might translate this to deal fairly with people; pay what they deserve; in employment terms pay a living wage; no zero hour contracts; don't always try and drive the hardest bargain; This we can do.

The soldiers come next – the same instruction – don't extort money; treat people fairly; be satisfied with what you are paid and what you have.

We might translate this to dealing honestly with each other and with respect and care; do not bully and harass people.

And be satisfied with what you have – do not always want what the next person has – that is also the 10th commandment “you shall not covet anything which belongs to your neighbour”.

Just as people might be thinking – we can manage that – John the Baptist starts up again – there is one who is coming who is more powerful – he will baptize you with fire – and the chaff (the husks of the corn, or stalk from the grain) will be thrown away and burnt.

The chaff are the things in our lives we do not need; we might have needed them in the past – the corn needs the husks to grow, the grain needs the stalk – but they are no longer needed.

Jesus, John tells us, will free us from those things, free us from things that hold us back, free us from regrets, free us from fear:

*Come, thou long-expected Jesus,
born to set thy people free;
from our fears and sins release us;
let us find our rest in thee.*

So maybe Paul's words about joy and John's challenge to us are related.

Maybe in letting go of our sense of privilege and entitlement, in letting go of anything that demeans others, we will then bear fruits worthy of the followers of Jesus.

We will find joy, gentleness and peace.

We will find joy is in the every day, ordinary sharing of food, of clothes, of resources;

joy in treating people with respect and love;

joy in hanging on to hope

joy in the simple things

joy in waiting for the birth of the Christ child, the joy of every longing heart.