

Isaiah 61 – Finding Joy at Christmas

Today would normally have been our Gift Service. That special day of the year when the church would have been full of people. Young and old alike gathered to worship God and be reminded of the wonder of the season.

Our young people would have performed their Nativity, where anything might happen from Mary and Joseph having a set-to, to the baby Jesus being stolen from the crib. But that's what makes it so wonderful.

Then there would have been gifts brought forward and laid at the foot of the tree as we all sing together *"What can I give him poor as I am, if I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb, if I were a wise man, I would do my part, yet, what I can I give him, give him my heart."*

But COVID-19, has stopped us on our tracks and made us reassess everything again.

But yet, in the midst of all the darkness and gloom, we remember again that wonderful story, and we cast our minds back to that incredible first night.

Mary and Joseph, two young people making their way through a dark maze. Nowhere to stay, no room at the inn, little money and few friends, if any. Pointing fingers and wagging tongues. Mary perplexed by the news that she has received that in her womb is the Son of God.

Suddenly, when we start to look back to that first night, a strange sense of wonder and joy begins to come back to us. Suddenly a glimmer of light flickers in the sky and we look up and see that a bright star will shine again for us this year. In fact, the Bethlehem star will shine, the first time in 800 years, where Jupiter and Saturn cross paths. This is what the Wise Men saw all these years ago and suddenly a sense of joy lights up our dark night. Is this another sign from God that something wonderful is about to happen!

God is with us rings out the message of the angels, *peace on earth to all people* and we realise this is no fairy-tale or Pixar wizardry, this is the message from the eternal God, that born in the stable is the Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Prince of Peace.

Then when we focus on the story that night of the reluctant innkeeper squeezing Mary and Joseph into the back room of the inn, a place where the animals were kept - well at least it was going to be warm in amongst the goats and the cattle and whatever other animals filled the space.

Then wonder fills the air, when the scruffy, and no doubt rather smelly, shepherds enter the scene. Their darkness that night had been illuminated by a gathering of angels. Their night was lit up by a technicolour, all-singing-all-dancing angelic party.

Go to Bethlehem, they said, and see the baby, and as they entered the darkness of the stable, their eyes were filled with wonder as they witnessed the birth of a baby. But not any baby, a special baby. The Son of God!

And the birth story is not finished there, because astrologers who travelled for hundreds of miles following a star, turned up, albeit not on the night of the birth, as St Francis of Assisi would have us think, but a year later, but nonetheless they turned up with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to lay before the child. They turned up searching for a King and they found a baby and were filled with wonder and joy as they bowed in worship before the child.

This was no fairy-tale that offers a temporary warm feeling which watching *Elf* or *Wonderful Life* might do for us. This story is more than the fruit of an imaginative mind, or a skilful screen writing team, paid big money to distract us from the predictability of our lives.

No, this story tells us that we are not alone. Not only is there a heaven as well as an earth but the two have intersected. Not only have we been visited but we have been rescued, not by a superman or a swashbuckling warrior, but in the coming of a tiny child.

A child who was predicted 700 years before, by a prophet called Isaiah. A child who would become the reason of our Joy and who would turn hearts back to God.

A child who grows to become a man, and proclaim liberty to the Jews in Babylon, and a message of joy to a lost world.

Today is the Sunday that we light the Candle of Joy and a day that we don't lose sight of that first Christmas? Where joy was brought into the world - but what does that joy look like?

Well, both Isaiah and John the Baptist spell this out for us.

Joy is found, first and foremost in having God's spirit rest upon us. *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me* said Jesus as he quoted words from Isaiah.

Jesus was anointed by God. Something joyful has been created.

The prophet Isaiah describes how Jesus felt, “*I am overwhelmed with joy in the Lord my God*” – Is 61:10.

Why was this? We are told firstly:

That He is to bring good news to the poor.
This baby will grow to be a man and become a prophet. He will preach the Gospel - a word which simply means *good news* and that was Christ's first desire – to be a messenger of good news.

Christmas is above everything else good news. What is the good news? Simply that God has come to us to share his love with this world and that He has done it in a particular way. He has become one of us, so that we can identify with Him. He who was rich became poor for our sake that we might become rich. The good news is that he has taken all our sin, everything that we have done wrong from the moment of birth, to the moment of death, he has taken everything on his own shoulders and reconciled us to His Father. This is Good news indeed. Christ is God's gift to this world and like all gifts, He needs us to receive it and open it and embrace it and enjoy it. That is what Christmas is all about – The Gift of God wrapped in Jesus Christ. He came to bring good news to the poor. Not to those who don't need him but those who are dependent on him, whatever our material circumstances may be, wealthy or poor, He has come to those who know their need for his joy in their hearts.

But even more, we are told that He has come to bring comfort to the broken hearted. When he would become a man, He would be a healer. He would give sight to the blind and that's what he did, he healed those who were blind, he healed those who had leprosy and who were deaf. But Isaiah says that Christ heals the broken hearted. What a great message for Christmas. That the baby born in the manger was born to bring healing. That's how Charles Wesley understood it in his great hymn, *Hark the Herald Angles Sing*...and in the second verse.

*Light and life to all He brings,
Risen with healing in His wings.
Mild He lays His glory by,
Born that man no more may die;
Born to raise the sons of earth,*

*Born to give them second birth
Hark! the herald angels sing,
"Glory to the new-born King"*

We all need healing, for we are all human and we are made in the image of God, we are not made to be God – no one is perfect, and so we will always be in need of his healing. Christ has come to heal the broken-hearted, again those who know their need for him.

Thirdly, He was a King, issuing out a Decree of Deliverance. Captives will be released and prisoners will be freed. Like the blowing of a great trumpet, he announces that God's people are set free from their sins and from their guilt and from injustice and from this world. Christ has come to deliver, and only the King can set someone free, and Jesus Christ is the King in the spiritual world, and today he comes to us to set us free from our fear and our anxiety. Christ is the deliverer, and Christmas is a time when we remember that we are set free and, in this freedom, we find joy and peace and happiness.

The great hymn writer, Isaac Watts, the pioneer of modern hymns, wrote this 1719 and we still love to sing it today.
Joy to the world says it all.

*Joy to the world! the Lord is come;
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare him room,
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven, and heaven, and nature sing.*

*Joy to the world! the Saviour reigns;
Let men their songs employ;
While fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains
Repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat, repeat the sounding joy.*

*No more let sins and sorrows grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make His blessings flow
Far as the curse is found,*

*Far as the curse is found,
Far as, far as, the curse is found.*

*He rules the world with truth and grace,
And makes the nations prove
The glories of His righteousness,
And wonders of His love,
And wonders of His love,
And wonders, wonders, of His love.*

Christ came to announce that God's grace is with us and that God has opened up a way for us to know him and trust him.

So, this year, we may not have our traditions as we have known them in church, we cannot watch our children out front in the chancel reacting to this great story. We cannot even sing carols, but the wonder of this story lives on in our hearts, for when we strip everything back, we are left with the joy of the season.

The Kingdom of God has come in this baby and it really is magical, supernatural and revolutionary. And the words "The End" never arrive, because the baby grew up, showed us how to live and then beat everything back, hands-down as he willingly placed his hands on a cross. And the ultimate hairpin turn in the plot was this: written off as dead, He rose again. Jesus is alive and wonder lives on. He is with us today in Spirit and that is what gives us Joy. His joy living in us!

So, darkness and viruses and evil will not have the final word, the final word goes to God who comes to us again this Christmas and blesses us with an incredible joy, because we have again glimpsed the glory of the Christmas story, and may we also, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, be able to say, *"I am overwhelmed with joy in the Lord my God!"*

May God bless you this Christmas, as you travel towards the joy of Christmas Day.