

*Sermon preached by Revd Rachel McDougall*

*St Paul's Canterbury*

*Advent 3A*

*Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> December 2019*

*Joy – Discovering and Living Joy*

What gives you joy?

Welcome to the Sunday of Joy – Gaudete Sunday.

This is a Sunday where we look forward to joy and hope.

This is not mere happiness, but something deeper and richer that gives depth to our lives even when our lives have their share of difficulties.

This is what Isaiah the prophet looked forward to in the reading today.

‘The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom, the crocus it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing?’

These beautiful words remind us of joy in blossoming plants, in water breaking out in the wilderness and the speechless singing for joy.

It is joy coming from the midst of the dryness of the desert, water in the parched wilderness and burning sand.

Isaiah is speaking in the middle of the hopelessness and suffering of exile. It was a time of slaughter, deprivation, sadness at the hands of the Babylonians.

Isaiah anticipates what is to come. Israel's desperate situation was very real, just as many people find themselves in places of real suffering or grief and feel it even more at this time of year.

Isaiah speaks in the midst of it all and promises that God will bring restoration and transformation where gladness and joy will be known again.

And this promise is that those who are the most vulnerable will have the greatest reason to celebrate. Joy is about signs of hope – of God's loving presence.

Such transformation is what Mary also sings about in her song of joy, hope and God's favour.

On this Sunday of joy the reading from Matthew doesn't at first glance seem to fit, but perhaps it does when we think of expectations of how God comes.

John the Baptist finds himself in prison and sends his followers to ask a question.

'Are you the one to come or are we to await another?'

John the Baptist has gone through such change – from a prophet out in the desert who people flocked to. He is the one who was talked about as the great preparer, the one who his Dad sang about with such joy.

He is the one who seemed so certain and assured in his role.

And now he finds himself in prison, at the edge of things, no longer the centre of attention, confined.

No wonder he sends his followers a long way to ask his question.

Is it a question because he expected Jesus to be more powerful in what he did?

Or is it a question that is seeking to be clear that what John has done has been worth it and not a complete sham?

Jesus' answer holds echoes of Isaiah.

He does not justify who he is, or even argue with John the Baptist. He simply says – Go tell John what you hear and see – the blind seeing, the lame walk, the lepers and cleansed the deaf hear, the dead are raised.

There is no axe of judgement here but instead the words and actions of compassion to all who are vulnerable.

As John Bell says: *Jesus has not come to crack the whip, but to bring joy, hope and new life. Jesus is God's way of refusing to give up his dream for the world.*

There are times for us all when we can wonder with the exiles about how long we need to wait for restoration.

We can question with John how long will we be left in the prisons of grief, or struggle, pain or loss.

For all of us the pain of life can be very real.

Yet joy can be brought to birth in the midst of prison.

The readings today give us encouragement that God does and will meet us.

They challenge us to look for signs of joy and hope because they come when we least expect it.

Both of these readings appeal to us to continue to look for something deeper.

Hearing carols on the radio can suddenly lift us out of our preoccupations to encounter wonder and joy.

Beauty in whatever form can be a reminder to us.

Joy and passion when connected with creativity and reason bring an outcome which is much deeper.

In a radio interview on ABC Classic FM Paul Keating said most people would be surprised that the economic reforms of the Australian economy come off the back of Mahler, Shostakovich and Elgar.

*He said: 'You can live off briefing notes, absorb policy be part of a cabinet yarn, but if it isn't infused with the search for beauty, the search for the other world, things become ordinary.'*

*When I hear music I think I must do better and you see the picture larger, get lines of logic straighter, and get the whole game braver.'*

I think these words say something to us of the journey of longing and looking for God's coming and noticing what gives us joy.

It reminds us of what the riches of our trust in God do give.

Advent is a time of waiting and watching and longing with expectation for God's coming in our midst as we look to the light of Christ.

Faith helps us, God's love enlivens us to strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees.

This time is a time to notice where joy and beauty are and how you build gratitude into your life.

It is also a time to share the joy with someone else – a compliment, some encouragement and a phone call or a visit to someone who might be feeling overwhelmed by life.

Buechner says: *Joy is home... God created us in joy and for joy, and in the long run not all the darkness there is in the world and ourselves can separate us finally from that joy. We have God's joy in our blood.*

*Lections:  
Isaiah 35.1-10  
Song Of Mary  
Matthew 11.2-11*