

**Advent 3B, 2008**

Isa 61:1-4; 8-11; Ps 126; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28; John 1:6-8; 19-28

***Gaudete! Rejoice!***

***Rev Robyn Boyd***

The great Christian writer of Narnia fame, C S Lewis, in his book, *Surprised by Joy*, talks about being struck with "stabs or pangs of joy" from his childhood, throughout his life. He describes this Joy as a longing so intense for something so good and so high up it could not be explained with words.

With some tenacity, he searches for this joy, searches for its source, searches to capture it and hold onto it; at first through his intellect, through great rational debates and academic learning; through a period of atheism, and all the time quite steadily and consciously resisting the church, resisting the claims of Christianity, which he found so unattractive. And finally he comes to a point of surrender.

He writes: "*You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen (College, Oxford), night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.*" – *Surprised by Joy*

Lewis discovered a recovery of a child-like wonderment at the world and its mysteries, and came to realize that his old experiences of 'Joy' had been pointers, reminding him that he was made for another world: he now reinterpreted them as longings for God, as the interruption by the invasion of God's sudden grace into our lives. He felt the pangs of 'Joy' again many times in his life, but now he knew this Joy was that God-born intense desire to find a home in God; this was the joy only experienced through encounter with the God made known in Christ. This joy was not the product of circumstances, and was something far more than that satisfying feeling we can experience when things go well.

This Sunday, Advent 3, is often called "Gaudete" Sunday – Gaudy Sunday, Rejoicing Sunday, even Rose Sunday. Our readings all take us into the mystery of joy, announcing that joy is possible –not elusive stabs of Joy, or moments of feeling really great, but Joy known deep in our spirit, irrespective of circumstance: the Joy that CS Lewis had searched for and tried to describe. Joy as proclaimed by Isaiah: "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God". And Joy as the psalmist looks forward to, "reaping with songs of joy".

But yet, the stories and life experiences of these Biblical writers weren't exactly easy and trouble-free. In fact, such a deep and resonating joy would be one of the last things we'd expect. Their joy is not easily won – the hope and anticipation of it and the memory of its possibility is always there in front of them, but it sits alongside and even in contrast with the realities of hard things in life.

Both Isaiah and the Psalmist are writing in the years after the exiled Hebrew people have returned to Jerusalem. They came home singing and dancing, with great joy in their release from captivity. Their homecoming is beautiful, even inspiring, but then reality sets in – life is hard. They’ve come back to a city in ruins; there’s devastation all around. At first, in their delight in their new freedom, they have energy and confidence that restoration will follow. But the task of rebuilding is just too overwhelming and complicated. They struggle to maintain hope.

You can hear their longing in the Psalm: “Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the streams return to the dry south”. These streams - the watercourses – the wadis – in the South, in the Negeb desert were deeply etched dry, sandy tracts of erosion; dry for 6 months of the year, then suddenly the rains would come, swelling the wadis and spilling out into the surrounding land. Then the desert would positively bloom; burst into flower, fruit, life. These people are longing for that drenching, that overflowing abundance of life-giving water, life giving spirit that will restore and transform the desert of their lives. Being filled to overflowing with Joy! The hopelessness of the dry and barren turns into overwhelming fruitfulness.

We hear it, too, in Isaiah: the word of the Prophet speaking into lives parched and besieged in devastation and despair; announcing the good news that will cause the desert of their lives to break open with life and joy.

With all their longing and hope in their hearts, with all their rejoicing and gratitude at what God had done for them and their ancestors, these returned exiles are discovering that the joy of their longed-for return is not the joy that God promises. Real Joy isn’t dependent on our good luck of escaping hardship, or avoiding pain or on any life circumstance. There isn’t a packaged formula for Joy. For those –like these exiles, like ourselves – who keep God as the centre of their lives, there is this curious dichotomy, or tension, of suffering and adversity on the one hand, and this sort of suppressed joyful longing in the knowledge and trust that in ‘sowing in tears, we will reap with joy’.

What about for us? I doubt whether there’s anyone here who hasn’t had to face sorrow and adversity, and who as followers and believers in Christ have not had to try to reconcile that trust that their weeping *will* turn into songs of joy. This Advent, the pain spreads as one nation after another faces cascading economic problems, not the least of them unemployment or the threat of unemployment and the significant diminishing of carefully saved-for and formulated retirement incomes. And throughout our world there are systems and practices and attitudes that keep people down if not captive, trapped in poverty, hunger, disease, and war.

While we observe Advent, the world around us tells us to be joyful as we shop and cook and party, as we carry our personal sorrows and our fears for our futures. And all around us are also those who carry heavy burdens of grief, depression, loss, illness, financial worries. The holidays make these problems even more pressing. Homecomings, and seasonal celebrations, can be filled with expectation and met with disappointment. The incidence of family violence escalates, old family grievances get aired; people compete for favours with gift buying, peace is sought through the bottle, and everyone pretends; children are passed between warring parents like weapons or pieces of barter. Not too many of us who haven’t experienced something awful about the Christmas season. [She suggests –partly in

humour, partly quite serious -that as part of our Advent observance and Christmas celebration, we might do well to hold a Blue Christmas service for those who are pressed down with grief and worry.(Next year, maybe?)]

By now, you may be wondering, Where's the joy? Is the best we can ever do just stabs of joy? We seek joy in this season, but perhaps we look for the wrong sort of joy, or in the wrong places and in the wrong ways. As we read in the psalm, the seeds of God's sustaining joy have been planted in sadness and watered with tears. This is the honest joy that often comes only after the nights of weeping and the days of longing to be satisfied by the close comfort of the loving God we know and expect. This joy is counter cultural, and defies intuition. It sees good news in the mess of the world, in the tough places of our lives, and dares to rejoice. Such joy contrasts and shows up the frenetic grasping and flimsy tinsel of the world's joys and affirms the solidarity of God's joy.

In our Advent hope, as we look toward the birth of Jesus Christ, we acknowledge that in that event another reality, that of God's world and ways, enters our own existence and changes things in a way that fosters joy in all who see it.

Isaiah knew, the Psalmist knew, CS Lewis and countless Christians have discovered, the Joy we know in Christ is not just an experiential "now" thing, it's shaped by a reality that lies beyond present experience and world. It's bordered on one side by a memory of God's acts, and on the other side by hope in God's promises: this is the joyful hope given to us by Christ's resurrection and the promise of restoration and renewal of all things – and in this joyful hope, anticipated joy can become a reality in our lives now, the coming home to the loving presence of God.

In this advent season, the Psalm leaves us with a call to be people whose lives are shaped not by the limits of our experiences but by the hidden reality of what God has already declared will be. It also leaves us with a tremendous sense of joy in 'coming home' as the Lord comes to us in the midst of the tears of this earthly experience