

Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Readings: [Micah 5.2-5a](#), [Hebrews 10.5-1](#), [Luke 1.39-55](#)

22 December 2024

It's difficult to avoid the joy in today's gospel. I'm sure that many sermons have been preached on this passage that have spoken about other insights but you cannot ignore the feel of the text, and it is joyous.

How are you with 'joy'? I have to admit, I'm not the greatest practitioner of it – maybe that's why the mood of our gospel spoke to me. In a world and a church dominated by stories of human hurt and damage it feels frivolous to even mention the word. Lord, have mercy is rightly the refrain for the times. And yet the desire to be surprised by joy as C S Lewis put it, is undoubtedly at the heart of what it means to be human? In the list of the fruit of the Spirit joy sits between love and peace. All three are interconnected in our search for meaning.

A few weeks ago, I watched the re-opening of Notre-Dame. The beauty of the windows, cleaned stone, new timbers, liturgical space, the breath-taking organ and accompanying music. In the drama of the moment though there was something going on that seemed to be more than the sum of the parts. Was this joy?

Nick Cave has spent decades writing song lyrics about the human dark side. Recently, he wrote a song simply called 'Joy'. He observes that

**...all across the world they shout bad words,
they shout angry words**

**About the end of love, yet the stars stand above the earth
Bright, triumphant metaphors of love**

And the song trails off repeating the word 'Joy, joy, joy... Joy here is an experience of grace.

This week I saw joy in the faces of Syrians in Damascus and it reminded me of the day that Nelson Mandela walked free and the Berlin wall came down. Oppression offends the very nature of human life, distorting the way we have to live, crushing our God-given spirit for life, locking us into fear. It is a joyless, loveless state. Joy is released in a world that allows humans to breathe. In the face of the liberated we see the potential for a better, truer world. Joy here is about justice, a world where the potential for loving your neighbour is primary.

Advent is full of some extraordinary passages from Isaiah. They are written against a background of international violence, the forced movement of people, national tragedy, injustice and a pervading sense of hopelessness. The prophet begs to differ. Those who live in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined. Using metaphors of deserts exploding into life and creation being at peace with itself he dares to speak about an everlasting joy and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. Isaiah's gospel is a counter-cultural reimagining of life under God. With each subsequent generation that hope ebbs and flows among God's people. It becomes an ache.

And then there is a crack in the darkness and a shaft of light appears. Hardly anyone sees it. Something stirs in an unexpected place and with unexpected people. All national, civic and religious leadership is bypassed. According to the opening chapters of Luke the Spirit of God is doing what the Spirit does - hovering creatively, filling everyone with the divine presence, angels popping out of their reality, babies leaping in the womb, a song for the ages and joy happens in the interaction between two women in a front room in the hill country outside the capital city.

This is one of the great moments in the gospels. You cannot help but warm to Elizabeth, this older woman, surprised by her own pregnancy and now thrilled at Mary's arrival. She cries out 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy.' Elizabeth, recognises the work of God in Mary. She even calls her the mother of my Lord. This is extraordinary language. It is Easter resurrection language.

Elizabeth shows us the art of blessing. It is about mutuality, recognising the work of God in another and blessing them for the gift that they have brought us. The Irish priest poet, John O'Donohue, writes that the art of blessing grows out of 'a kindness that dwells deep down in things... when a blessing is invoked, it changes the atmosphere. Some of the plenitude flows into our hearts from the invisible neighbourhood of loving kindness.'

And Elizabeth is not finished yet. Almost as if she is looking out of her time to all who will hear her words. She offers another blessing in the third person, to you and me. Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord. The promise is realised. The ache finds its remedy.

And Mary, the teenage poet theologian, responds with a song of praise and amazement which captures the gospel. Mary knows her God. She speaks out of her tradition and experience. This is the primary call for the faithful in every generation. Know your God. This Lord, my Saviour, showing power in vulnerability, this holy, merciful, faithful One has noticed even her - the one with no significant ancestry, no public position or reputation for piety, someone who lives in a northern town with a poor name for itself. A very young woman, in a world that values seniors. A woman, in a world run by men. A powerless person in an unsafe world where anyone making a Messiah claim would have been immediately at risk. This God has looked with favour on her and in so doing is turning the world upside down. A levelling up strategy where the proud and the leaders and the uber wealthy have been bypassed and the poor and the unknown and the outcast come centre stage.

So, what are we to say about joy?

Frederich Buechner observes that it's not the same as happiness. Happiness turns up more or less where you'd expect it to - a good marriage, a rewarding job, a pleasant vacation. Joy, on the other hand, is as notoriously unpredictable as the one who bequeaths it. Is that right though?

Today's story does seem to suggest that joy erupts when we say yes to God's new possibilities and dare to live the Magnificat. In a chaotic, weary, shouty world our vocation is to enact mercy, lift up the lowly and allow our souls to magnify the Lord. But joy is also about something that we cannot do for ourselves - it is about gift and grace, those bright triumphant metaphors of love, the Spirit inspired communion which is mutual blessing, the truth that we are loved and have peace with God.

Mary is the bearer of joy to the world. Joy is a person. The mystery which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. My soul magnifies the Lord. Joy, joy, joy...

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