

Advent 3

13th December 2020

Isaiah 61. 1-4, 8-11

Psalms 126

John 1. 6-8, 19-28

The Apostle Paul lists joy as one of the fruits of the Spirit – from the letter to the Galatians: *the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control*. There is no question that joy is a gift. We live in a society which chases after happiness as though it is an object to be possessed. But the more we chase it the more it seems we are incapable of finding or attaining it. And our striving for it is costly, often requiring the spending of great wads of money or great effort of some kind. The task of finding happiness is so often a great diversion from life itself. Chasing after happiness seems also to be a striving which seeks a one-dimensional experience – unalloyed happiness; with anything difficult erased from view. If you have lived for any length of time and have become reconciled with your life, you will know that this is just not possible.

It seems a strange paradox that joy is only possible when we have experienced pain or hardship of some kind. Joy appears as a gift in the gap between that pain and those moments when we recognise the ultimate goodness of life; in this space joy floods in and we bask in its glow.

Oliver Sacks, doctor and wonderer about the human condition, writing in a little book entitled *Gratitude says: At nearly eighty, with a scattering of medical and surgical problems, none disabling, I feel glad to be alive – “I’m glad I’m not dead” sometimes bursts out of me when the weather is perfect.*

This is joy. And joy is infectious because it tells of an underlying hopefulness in the depths of our being; a hopefulness that springs up, that in spite of our difficulties and trials we have a deep sense of the love of God and the goodness inherent in the creation.

As we move toward Christmas, we anticipate the joy that the story brings us. It is not a story of unalloyed happiness because we must recognise that the innocence of the stable is overshadowed by the shame of an unwed mother, a murderous monarch, an absence of hospitality for the couple. It is not a given whether the child or his parents will survive. But even in the shadow of these things there is Mary’s joyful defiance which we hear in the Magnificat (next week), there is Joseph’s quiet and courageous protection of the life of the Christ-child, there is the smelly, bumbling joy of the shepherds. Unselfconscious, unabashed, reckless. People abandoned to joy. And so, we can sing: Joy to the world!

Andrew Boyle