

ADVENT CANDLE CEREMONY

This is the third Sunday of Advent. Today we look with joy to Mary and the Saviour that grows in her womb. Mary sang boldly when she might have been meek; she carries the beginning of a mighty revolution as the proud are brought down and the lowly lifted up.

READING: Luke 1:46-49

“And Mary said, ‘My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name’

Today we give thanks for the “Marys” among us. Those who step out of the roles society has planned; those determined to do as God asks; fearless and fearfully stepping out in faith, and beckoning us to do the same. This year has seen many such “Marys” stepping out and stepping up to help others through a very difficult year.

On this third Sunday of Advent, we light this Candle of Joy as a symbol of the joy which Mary felt when she realised that she was chosen by God for a very special task and also for the joy of the anticipated birth of the Christ Child.

(Light three candles.)

PRAYER

O God, rejoicing, we remember the promise of your Son. As the light from these candles, may the blessing of Christ come upon us, brightening our way and guiding us by his truth. May Christ our Saviour bring life into the darkness of our world, and to us, as we wait for his coming. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen

PSALM 126

¹ When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dreamed.

² Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the nations, 'The LORD has done great things for them.'

³ The LORD has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy.

⁴ Restore our fortunes, LORD, like streams in the Negev.

⁵ Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy.

⁶ Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them.

LUKE chapter 1 verses 39 - 56

³⁹ At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, ⁴⁰ where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴² In a loud voice she exclaimed: 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! ⁴³ But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfil his promises to her!'

⁴⁶ And Mary said: 'My soul glorifies the Lord ⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, ⁴⁸ for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, ⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me – holy is his name. ⁵⁰ His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. ⁵¹ He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. ⁵² He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. ⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. ⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful ⁵⁵ to Abraham and his descendants for ever, just as he promised our ancestors.'

⁵⁶ Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.

“CHRISTMAS JOY”

READING: *Luke 1 verses 39-56*

Sometimes there are tell tale signs when someone is in a good mood. Perhaps there is a little extra spring in their step. Perhaps they might be singing to themselves, or perhaps that smile on their faces could be just about give that air of happiness. Most have that particular tell tale sign which indicates to others just what kind of a mood we are in. Some people think that because I am very quiet at times - believe it or not – that I am either angry, or upset about something. Not always the case. Sometimes I just am quiet, especially in new surroundings with new people. So maybe tell tale signs can paint the wrong picture. People can be quite pushy about it with people who do not look happy, therefore they must be miserable. How often are we asked if we are happy, and we answer yes, to then be told “well tell that to your face”. Certainly, we have our little behaviours that reflect our good moods. But what about when it’s more than just a good mood?

So far, this year has not been exactly the year for good news. But despite everything which has happened and continues to do so, there have been pockets of good news. What about those times when you receive what seems like the best news of your whole life? What causes you to toss aside all inhibitions and celebrate wildly? Though it far too often seems as if such moments are few and far between, we do all have occasional moments of pure joy in our lives; times when all social graces are tossed aside so that the moment can be fully enjoyed and completely celebrated.

We might feel like dancing round. Or perhaps we shout and cheer with our arms in the air. Or maybe we just collapse in total, utter surprise. We might pick up the phone to call everybody we can think of to share the news. We might break out in a song, perhaps even making one up that specifically expresses the joy we feel on this great occasion. We might be so full of happiness that we clap our hands and stomp our feet as we sing. That’s the kind of thing we do when we feel pure, complete, unadulterated happiness.

Now, with that picture in your mind, think about our passage from Luke’s gospel. It is the story of Mary’s visit to her cousin Elizabeth. Mary has just learned that she is pregnant with the child of God, and by way of confirmation, the angel has also shared with her that her long barren cousin, Elizabeth, is pregnant as well. So Mary sets out to confirm this news and to share her own exciting news. They are experiencing complete delight, and their responses show that. Elizabeth is so excited that the baby within her “leaps” with joy, we are told. And Mary breaks out into this spontaneous song, that we call “The Magnificat.” It’s a made-up song, but it’s the kind of spontaneous reaction that occurs in the most joyful moments of our lives. As Mary sings, what she expresses is far more than just a passing happiness at the good news of a pregnancy. Instead, Mary is expressing some of the greatest hopes and dreams of the Israelite people - her people, which will now be fulfilled through the baby growing inside her. Can you imagine? Something that you have been waiting for and longing for your whole lifetime, and your ancestors before that, is about to happen! How can you help but be excited and Mary was joyfully excited. There has been much made of and said about the Health Secretary’s appearance on television this week at the announcement of the vaccine being available to battle COVID. Whether his tears were genuine or not is the subject of some people’s discussions, but Mary’s joyful outpouring was in no doubt.

For Mary this is more than just excitement; it’s more even than just simple happiness, because happiness is often fleeting. The healed relative returns home, life settles back into its usual routine and new challenges emerge. The flood waters of earlier this year receded only to be replaced by the mess of a clean up and battling with insurance firms. Some people get a few months into that brand new dream job, only to discover that the new boss is a “slave-driver” and there is less and less time to spend with family and more hassle to deal with. Just like that, the feelings of

happiness that were once so real are now gone completely. Probably more often than we would like to think, we are reminded that happiness can sometimes be empty and fleeting. But joy is something greater. Joy is more than just a good feeling, it's more lasting. Joy is the fulfilment of our greatest dreams, and an experience of peace that sustains us at all times and in every place; even in the midst of life's ups and downs, joy is still present. It has been said that, "happiness is an outside job, but joy is an inside job" and "happiness depends on happenings, but joy is deeper and longer lasting" because real lasting joy comes through faith in God. Real joy is only possible because of God's work in the world; which is precisely why when we meet Mary and Elizabeth in this passage from Luke's gospel, they are so completely joyful.

It might seem rather odd that we could call Mary and Elizabeth's celebration completely joyful when Mary is getting all excited about people being pulled away from their thrones or being sent away without any food. It sounds revolutionary, verging on complete anarchy. But this is all about how God is at work in the world, turning oppressive power structures upside down and establishing his reign of peace and justice, just as God has always promised. That is why these women are so excited. That is why they are full of joy. This is a celebration of God at work, beating down the bullies and blessing the oppressed and the outcasts. God has taken the initiative to turn the fortunes of the poor, hungry, enslaved, and miserable. If that's not a reason to celebrate, then what is? Mary and Elizabeth's celebration was so pure and complete that it became the inspiration for church festivals and celebrations for years to come.

In the Disney version of "The Hunchback of Notre Dame", in the medieval church there was an annual festival celebrated widely called the "Feast of Fools." One character, Clopin, describes the "Feast of Fools" as a "topsy-turvy" day when "weeds are a bouquet" and "every man's a king and every king's a clown." In these ancient festival celebrations, the people would hold fake elections and they would "elect" bogus officials, who would wear inside-out costumes, carry upside down books, and recite inarticulate gibberish, all in jest. They were mocking the powerful elite. The reason they did this was a literal acting out of Mary's Magnificat. The powerful were mocked as the "low life's" (so to speak) became the "favoured" for a day. At its heart, the "Feast of Fools" was an odd witness to the God who topples human power structures, turns the world "topsy-turvy," and raises the downtrodden to a position of honour and feasting.

If we take Mary's Magnificat too seriously, it seems to be nothing more than an angry rant from a girl who is harbouring a lot of bitterness. But Mary wasn't angry or bitter when she visited Elizabeth, far from it. She is watching God's plans and promises unfold right before her eyes. Even though Jesus, the Saviour, hasn't been born yet, she already knows how he is going to turn the world upside down. It's the most wonderful, exciting news of her life. She was full of joy like she had never experienced before, the kind of joy that can only be expressed completely with singing, and dancing, and laughing, and celebrating in the streets just as people do on the "Feast of Fools."

In this reading, we take one brief peak into the lives of Mary and Elizabeth. It just happens to be the moment when they are realizing that the God they have so faithfully loved and followed is really beginning to start changing the world for the better as he has always promised he would. They can't contain their joy and theirs is a celebration which should continue even today, especially today, now that God's work in Christ has already begun. As we watch God's work unfold in this world, we should be celebrating in the same way that Mary and Elizabeth did so many years ago. God's gift of joy is offered to each of us. As Jesus Christ is busy making this world a better place, it should be a constant source of joy for each of us and we should never stop celebrating the God who makes all things right.

COVID and restrictions may try to suck the joy out of Christmas and replace it with fear and resentment but Christmas is certainly not cancelled. That message of joy to Mary and Elizabeth, that same message of joy to the outcast shepherds on the hillsides outside Bethlehem – that message of "good news of great joy to all the people." May our hearts be full of the joy that comes only from God himself, a lasting joy.