

Advent 3. Revd David Treharne. Rejoice, Repent, Rejoice

Collect

God for whom we watch and wait,
you sent John the Baptist to prepare the way of your Son:
give us courage to speak the truth,
to hunger for justice,
and to suffer for the cause of right,
with Jesus Christ our Lord.

Post Communion

We give you thanks, O Lord, for these heavenly gifts;
kindle in us the fire of your Spirit
that when your Christ comes again
we may shine as lights before his face;
who is alive and reigns now and for ever.

Zephaniah 3:14-end

A Song of Joy

¹⁴ Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter Jerusalem!

¹⁵ The Lord has taken away the judgements against you, he has turned away your enemies.
The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more.

¹⁶ On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion;
do not let your hands grow weak. ¹⁷ The Lord, your God, is in your midst,
a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness,
he will renew you^[a] in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing

¹⁸ as on a day of festival.^[b] I will remove disaster from you,^[c]
so that you will not bear reproach for it. ¹⁹ I will deal with all your oppressors
at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast,
and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth.

²⁰ At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you;
for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth,
when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the Lord.

Luke 3:7-18

⁷ John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?' ⁸ Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ⁹ Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.'

¹⁰ And the crowds asked him, 'What then should we do?' ¹¹ In reply he said to them, 'Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.' ¹² Even tax-collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, 'Teacher, what should we do?' ¹³ He said to them, 'Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.' ¹⁴ Soldiers also asked him, 'And we, what should we do?' He said to them, 'Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.'

¹⁵ As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah,^[d] ¹⁶ John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with^[e] the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

¹⁸ So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

Rejoice Repent Rejoice

Rejoice, repent, rejoice – that’s the message from the pulpit today!

The third Sunday of Advent is traditionally called “Gaudete” Sunday. Gaudete means ‘rejoice!’ To reflect this in many churches, the more sombre seasonal purple colour might be put aside in favour of a lighter, happier rose pink. Some churches and clergy will even wear some rose pink!

Some of you may have heard about my experience as a curate in the Parish of Caerphilly? (I may have to be careful here as this is recorded in St Luke’s) Being a fairly Anglo Catholic church I was instructed that would have to wear the rose chasuble... which had been gifted to the church. Well... I looked like a piece of Turkish delight! Indeed I was to be the cause of any joy for everyone else!!! I walked through the vestry door and into the main body of the church, and our wonderful organist started playing the Pink Panther theme tune!!! Never again will I be wearing rose pink garments for a service in church!

Anyway, the rose pink colour in church has nothing to do with the Pink Panther... but it does have everything to do with joy. The joy of the Lord. The hope, peace, love and light that comes in Christ. Rejoice at what God has done, is doing and will do! The joy of our salvation and the hope of glory. Today we are reminded that joy and rejoicing are meant to be part of the experience of God’s people! Indeed, it is something we are called to practice day by day.

“Sing aloud!” the prophet Zephaniah instructs us. “Rejoice and exult with all your heart!” “Shout aloud and sing for joy,” says the prophet Isaiah. “Rejoice in the Lord always” St Paul writes in his letter to the Philippians.

Many of us have known great joy in our life in Christ, and what it is to be fuelled by the Spirit of God to sing aloud and rejoice. Some of us may in that place today?? Yet some of us will also find the words and the exhortation rather jarring. Shout aloud... that rather offends my introversion and it goes against my upbringing in a rather reserved Church of England! I get that!!

There’s a story about a senior cleric in one of our Cathedrals, who happened to be a very lively and joyful character, and he was confronted one day by a parishioner on the question of joyful music in church. The parishioner made the mistake of asking this particular priest ‘you’re not one of the happy clappy clergymen are you?’ To which he replied “no, I’m a miserable so and so like you”.

Some of us, may have practised being overly reserved to the point of being miserable and gloomy and in a bad mood cycle for such a long time that we’ve forgotten how to rejoice and we know that needs to change!

Greek philosopher Plato argued that the minimum drinking age should be 18, and that wine should be drunk in moderation until a man reaches 40 when he may drink as much as he wants as a ‘cure for the

crabbedness of old age.' Don't underestimate the power of practising being miserable, gloomy and in a bad mood... it's not good to live with!

However, there is very fair question of how are we supposed to rejoice always when our hearts are breaking? What songs of gladness can we sing when despair, exhaustion, and fear darken our lives? How do we rejoice in the face of the ongoing heartache of Covid and the fallout in our politics, and when people's anxiety levels have spiked and fuses shortened?

In that Old Testament reading the prophet Zephaniah invited the people to "rejoice." "Believe that God will bring healing and restoration." These words were spoken to a people whose lives and homes had been destroyed; faithlessness, despair and gloom were running rampant when he spoke them. Zephaniah's call to rejoice must have seemed ludicrous... and the call to rejoice may seem equally ludicrous to us.

Yet the challenging call to rejoice is there... and is just that... a challenge! Look to Christ and rejoice, not your circumstances!

We're back to Advent 1 and lifting up our heads to see beyond our current circumstances and predicaments... out of the darkness... to the dawning light of God!

This is also where the uncomfortable ministry of John the Baptist can come in. With all that is going on, and not much to rejoice in, 'what shall we do?'

"You brood of vipers!" I've always wanted to try that out as a sermon starter!
Repent. Bear fruit. Wake UP!

According to Luke, great crowds streamed into the desert to get shouted at by John to repent. Why? Why were they willing and even eager to hear his fire-and-brimstone preaching? What drew them?

Well, I think the question '**what shall we do?**' gives some insight. It's a question people may well ask when things are not going well, perhaps when we've come to the end of ourselves... and our lives, our church or our world is not working. "What should we do?"

We're hurting, we've messed up, we've had enough, we're desperate, our politics, our religion and our communities aren't working, we're in trouble, we've run out of ideas, we're struggling to rejoice... "what should we do?"

We want things to be different. We don't want things to be this way anymore.

So what shall we do? John actually gives very practical advice to answer the question, "what should we do?" Things don't have to remain the way that they are. Repent. Go and do things differently. Live differently. Be the change. Changing your attitude and lifestyle in all that you do.

John the Baptist doesn't say to his listeners, "come and live with me here in the desert and escape the daily round." "Leave your home and community behind, together with all your challenges and circumstances and eat locusts and wild honey." No, John the Baptist says, "don't stay here... go to your home, go to your community and go your workplace and live

differently, do things differently, very differently... be a light in the darkness, an influence for positive change and a promoter of God's reign."

One commentator rewords John as saying,

"Stop fleeing. Stop insisting that God is far away from the nitty-gritty dailiness of your particular life. Instead of waiting for a holy someday that will never come, inhabit the stuff of your life as deeply and as generously as you can right now. Share now. Be merciful now. Do justice now. Inhabit your life, no matter how plain, how obscure, how unglamorous, how routine. Why? Because the holy ground that matters most is the ground beneath your feet."

"To the tax collectors, he says, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." To the soldiers: "No harassment, no blackmail... be content with your rations." (The Message). To the Pharisees and Sadducees: "Don't allow your religious heritage to make you arrogant or complacent." To everyone who has anything: "You have gifts to give. So stop hoarding. Stop procrastinating. Stop making excuses."

Repentance and a fruitful holy life is not some other worldly detached supernatural experience of a distant heavenly reality. Repentance and fruitful holiness is to be found in the purposeful living out of the ordinary, mundane, experiences, relationships and tasks of everyday life. That may disappoint many of us as it doesn't seem very super spiritual. However, it's amazing life changing news that God cares about and inhabits the ordinary, mundane experiences of everyday life. That's what we delight in with the incarnation... God taking on our flesh... entering our human reality and redeeming it!

God inhabits the ordinary and mundane experiences of everyday... notice him and work with him. How might he reign in and through you...

In the Christmas shopping
whole and peaceful.

In the family encounters that aren't quite

Whilst putting up decorations spending quality time with family. Writing Christmas cards, give a pleasant word of hope and encouragement.

In the workplace whether in person or remotely

In the wandering down the street and your chance encounters with others

In our choices and decisions about spending and giving

In our joy and in the pain, in the light and in the darkness of the world

When we recognise and respond to the Christ who is with us in all things and we live differently in him and with him at all times... the ordinary can actually become extraordinary!

Christ is our light... and calls us to repent and be his lights too... producing the fruit of good works in us and through us!

Now rejoice... that God is present, interested and active in every part of your ordinary, mundane, everyday experience and circumstances.