

Lord, teach us to live together in the flow of your love and to learn to embrace and embody your joy. Amen.

Christmas is coming!

I've been thinking a lot about joy this past week. We wish one another joy. We write it in our Christmas cards. We sing about it. So how do we get joy?

St Paul encourages us to 'rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances...hold fast to what is good'.

Even though we might find it really hard to feel like rejoicing or being thankful, St Paul doesn't give us a get out clause. He doesn't say, 'Only if you feel like it!' Even when things are grim, the order stand: rejoice!

How on earth? Well, because of Christmas.

Christmas is coming. It's a mere eight days away now, and despite all the dire things going on around us, there's still a growing sense of excitement and anticipation.

Christmas is coming, ready or not!

That's actually very important: ready or not.

With all the shopping done... or not.

With hearts and minds ready to yet again celebrate the birth of the Baby at Bethlehem...or not.

Believing that this Baby born in obscurity is actually the Saviour for all, come to redeem our fallen-ness and heal our brokenness and make all things new....or not believing.

Whatever our preparedness, whatever our circumstances, whatever the depth or shallowness of our faith, Christmas is coming.

And nothing, NOTHING will make it as if it had never come in the first place.

As we imagine that first Christmas and hear again the story retold, year after year, we are practicing joy, because that Christmas changed history and changed us.

That Christmas saw our God take flesh and come to dwell with us and show us the way to the Father. That Christmas began the journey towards Calvary and to the empty tomb.

And as we share the wonderful news all over again as if it is just newly made, our hearts lift. There is hope...hope that violence and hate are not the defining characteristics of our world, but rather that *'into this bleak and desperate world Christ appeared and lit a fire that has not gone out these two thousand years¹'* It's redeeming love, because of the Baby at Bethlehem.

There is peace for us too because we can know with utter certainty that our God is on our side, has done the unimaginable and has broken the power of death over us for ever....through Jesus: Baby, Traveler, Teacher, Healer, Friend, Master, Sacrificial Lamb, Risen Lord.

Knowing peace, experiencing hope, joy is ours. Joy that is deeper and more dynamic than mere passing happiness. It's real and lasting and unassailable. With joy we can rejoice, give thanks, pray with passion.

Christmas is coming. Nothing can stop it, because it's already happened. Reliving it year after year helps us to grasp again the reality of deep-down joy, filling us to the brim, spilling over into our lives, our relationships and to others. Joy is for sharing.

Amen.

¹ P65, Winter Fire, G K Chesterton and Ryan Whitaker Smith, Moody Publishers, Chicago