

Joy to the World

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Preacher: Ian Naismith

[0 : 00] Good evening everyone, it's really good to have you with us at our service this evening. As Fiona said, my name's Ian, and it's my privilege to think a little bit about the meaning of Christmas.

We've just sung Joy to the World, but I wonder if we look around our world today, whether that might seem a little bit hollow. There's a lot of places where there's not much joy.

The BBC on their website today had a news story which had the headline, Bethlehem is empty of joy, no Santa, no celebration.

And if you read a bit into the article, it talks about how there's no Christmas tree this year, there are no carols, there is no celebration of Jesus' birth. Because Bethlehem these days is part of the West Bank, which is an occupied territory in Israel and is largely a Palestinian people.

And even those who are Christians find it difficult to celebrate Christmas this year because a lot of them have relatives in Gaza. Little joy in Bethlehem.

[1 : 08] Little joy too, I suspect, in Jerusalem, certainly not in Gaza, or in Kiev or Kharkiv or Sudan or in Yemen or in the other places around the world where there is conflict.

Perhaps some of them we hardly read about or are aware of. Come to our own country and there are a lot of people who perhaps don't have much joy.

Many of us are privileged and we will enjoy Christmas tomorrow. We will enjoy the giving and receiving of presents. We will enjoy good food and time together. But there are an awful lot of people in our country today for whom that's not true.

We have the privilege here of having a food bank. And on Friday we were able to give out some Christmas goodies and some toys for children, for those who had children, and to give them something for Christmas.

But there are an awful lot of people for whom Christmas is a really difficult time and they perhaps are more aware than ever of how little they have. Next year in this country there's going to be a general election campaign.

[2 : 14] I'm fairly sure that none of the parties will be offering us joy in that. The message will be you won't be as bad under us as you would be under the other lot.

Perhaps for some of us too, Christmas is going to be a difficult time. A time perhaps when you remember relatives or friends who are no longer with us.

There are empty spaces at the table and that brings sadness. So can we have joy this Christmas? And what's the secret of that joy?

Well, I think clearly from the Bible the answer is yes, there is joy available. And it's a joy that can be despite whatever circumstances we are facing.

It's not dependent on what we have, who we're with, and what kind of importance or status we have in our world.

[3 : 13] Rather it's dependent on our relationship with God. And we find that joy when we go back to the first Christmas and to Bethlehem.

Bethlehem, which then, as now, was an occupied territory. It was occupied by the Romans. And probably a place where there would have been relatively little joy.

The people of Israel felt really oppressed by the Roman authorities. And they longed for their independence. They longed for someone who would come and free them from the Romans.

But there was no sign or little sign of that at the time. And yet, as we read in both Matthew and in Luke, after the birth of the Lord Jesus, there are two references to joy.

And it's not just any joy. There's a really strong emphasis in both of them, of the intensity of the greatness of that joy. So we see it first in the story of the shepherds around Bethlehem.

[4 : 25] The angel of the Lord appears to them. The sky lights up with the glory of the Lord. They're terrified. And the angel tells them not to be afraid because he's bringing them good tidings of great joy.

Great joy as he comes to tell them about something really exciting that's just happened not very far from where they are.

The birth of the Lord Jesus. As we read on what the angel has to say, I think there are two reasons he gives us why there should be great joy among all people, among all nations.

First of all, there's the joy of incarnation. A baby is born. We've been blessed in this church over the last few years that we've had a lot of babies born.

We've rejoiced with parents as they've had new life come into the world and into their families. It's wonderful as a church to be able to see the young children and the babies who are with us and to share something of the joy of their parents.

[5 : 46] How much more then should we rejoice, should we have joy over the baby that was born in Bethlehem? Because this was no ordinary baby.

We've been reading this evening some of the things that happened before Jesus was born. 700 years before, the prophet Micah prophesied that he will be born in Bethlehem.

This was not something that just happened. This was something that had been foretold many years before. The angel comes to Joseph and explains the reason why Mary is pregnant and that the person who is to be born, the baby who is to be born, is to be the son of God with us.

The incarnation is one of the most remarkable things, perhaps the most remarkable thing that has happened in history. We got a bit of a flavor of that from the reading in John, didn't we?

No one has seen God. God is invisible. God is a spirit. We can't see God in our world. We can see the work that God has done, but we can't see God.

[7 : 05] And yet God came into our world through his son in human form, living among us as a normal human, miraculously conceived but born naturally, and living a life where he needed food and drink and sleep and everything else that we need.

And he came to show us what God is like. He came to show us God's glory. And how marvelous it is, how much joy we should feel, that the God of heaven cared enough for us to send his son to be with us.

That God took on human flesh and became like us in every way, except that he was sinless.

And the joy of incarnation is one of the things that should really thrill us as we think about Christmas. That the baby in Bethlehem was not just an ordinary child.

He was, he is the son of God. But the angel says more than that to the shepherds, doesn't he? He says he's born a baby in Bethlehem, and he says he is a saviour.

[8 : 29] He is Christ the Lord. And the joy we can have at Christmas is not just the joy of incarnation, it's the joy of salvation. A saviour has come.

As I said earlier, the Jews were looking for a saviour. They'd look for many years for a messiah who had been prophesied. But they were looking for a saviour who would free them from the Roman authorities.

They were looking for someone who could liberate them, who could save them from the burden that they experience through being occupied by a foreign power.

But that wasn't the saviour who was born. That wasn't the purpose of Jesus coming into the world.

The son of God took on human flesh not to be a great ruler of his people at that time.

Not just to show us what God is like and to demonstrate the power and the wisdom of our God. The son of God came into the world to be the saviour of the world.

[9 : 48] The angel said to Joseph, we saw it in our reading earlier, that his name would be Jesus. God saves because he would save his people from their sins.

And so we celebrate salvation at Christmas. We celebrate the fact that it's not just a baby born in Bethlehem.

And that part of the story, the end result of the story that begins on Christmas Day is the Lord Jesus going to the cross at Calvary and there dying for us, taking our place, dying for our sins so that we could be forgiven by a God who is just and would recognize that the punishment has been taken for those who trust in the Lord Jesus.

There's a remarkable verse in the book of Hebrews. Hebrews chapter 12, it says this of Jesus, for the joy set before him, he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of

God.

For the joy that was set before him. What was that joy? Well, to some extent, I think the passage implies that the joy was in the reward that he would receive afterwards.

[11 : 16] That he would sit down at the right hand of God. That he would receive the acclaim of heaven for the great sacrifice that he'd made. But I think more particularly, the joy that the writer is thinking about here is that the joy that Jesus had in being able to save us from our sins.

In being able to do what was otherwise impossible and to reconcile man and God together. To do what we couldn't do. In our sin, in our failure, we are not able to restore our relationship with God. Our best isn't good enough. But what Jesus did on the cross as he took our place there is enough. And it can bring us back to our relationship with our God.

And Jesus, I'm sure, rejoiced in that. That was part of the joy that was before him. As he took that awful journey to the cross. As he suffered the mockery and the torture before being crucified there and being separated from his God.

Our salvation, if we know Jesus, is a course of great joy that can help us through all the difficulties of life. And all of us can know that joy this Christmas as we think about the Lord Jesus and what he's done for us.

[12 : 52] But I said there were two passages which talk about joy. And the other one is the second story that we read about, the one in Matthew, about the wise men coming to see the infant Jesus.

You remember they saw his star in the east. And they made their way to Jerusalem. And when they got there, they asked at the palace because they'd come to find the king of the Jews.

They asked at the palace where the king of the Jews was. Threw it into some kind of turmoil.

Particularly Herod the king. And we're told because the wise people there could look back in the Old Testament as we have this evening and see that it was prophesied that the Messiah would come from Bethlehem in Judea.

And so they left the palace. I wonder when they left the palace whether they were maybe a bit down. They'd come with this great news there's a king being born in Israel.

And what did they get? They got a king who is there who is trying to appear enthusiastic about it but I think fairly obviously wasn't. And would very soon afterwards instigate a murderous campaign against the children in the Bethlehem area.

[14 : 11] And they had the scholars there who just didn't care basically. He was a problem for them. Where is the Messiah to be born? They could look back and find in the Old Testament yes it's in Bethlehem but they showed no inclination to go there themselves.

They solved a nice problem and they move on to the next thing. And so the wise men come out of the palace and what do they see? They see the star that had been there in the east.

At some point they'd lost sight of the star. Whether they had to follow on the way to Bethlehem we don't know or Jerusalem rather we don't know but certainly one way or another the star had gone. And then they come out of the palace and they see the star and Matthew said they rejoiced with great joy. Different translations put it different ways.

They were overwhelmed with joy is probably as good a translation as any. These men who had come all this distance who perhaps had thought well are we going to see this king that's been born and suddenly they get the sign again from God that the king is there and there's a star they can follow the stars right over where Jesus is.

[15 : 33] And there's joy there and I suggest that's the joy of anticipation. of recognising that they are about to see something that is very wonderful.

It doesn't say later on that they rejoiced when they saw the crowd they worshipped and I'm sure they rejoiced as well. But they rejoiced when they saw the star. A lost joy of Christmas I think is in anticipation particularly for children as they look forward to getting their presents.

Our grandson Archie who is nine this year decided quite early on he only wants one present for Christmas and parents and grandparents and uncles and aunts have all clubbed together and he's going to get a VR headset tomorrow.

And he's the kind of age he doesn't express it too much but I'm sure he's really excited about that and most of the day tomorrow probably he'll be in another world and quite oblivious to us.

But a lot of children are like that aren't they? Maybe we as adults too. We look forward to what we're going to get at Christmas. We anticipate the celebration the joy that there's going to be and that anticipation in itself brings us joy in our lives.

[16 : 54] And that's what the wise men are experiencing here. The joy of anticipating their visit to Jesus being able to worship him being able to give him the gifts that they brought being able to be among the first to see this special king that's been born.

And laying aside what happened before Christmas Christmas also I think should be a time of anticipation for us. We look back to when Jesus came into the world in Bethlehem as a baby. but we can also look forward and we can anticipate the fact that the Lord Jesus is coming back again. That one day he'll return not as a baby but as a king and recognized as a king that every knee will bow before him.

That all the evil in the world will be overcome and he will rule in righteousness. And those of us who know him those of us who have trusted in him we will see him we will be like him we will be with him forever.

And that's a great source of joy I think for us too at Christmas. And if our situations are difficult if there are things in our lives that we say well that brings us sadness we are going through situations which are really hard then the anticipation of Jesus coming back and of going to be with him is something that can give us joy and hope even in that.

[18 : 35] Peter in his letter says that God has given us new birth into a living hope into an inheritance that can never perish spoil or fade.

And then he says in all this you greatly rejoice though now for a little while you may have to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.

So for many of us this Christmas is a time of joy. It is a time when we can look back and see the child of Bethlehem.

When we can think about the salvation that we have through the Lord Jesus. When we can look forward to the day when the Lord Jesus will return or when we go to be with him through death and when the sufferings and trials of this life are behind us.

Let's make sure our trust is in him. Let's think of him over this Christmas. Let's rejoice with great joy of what the Lord has done for us through Jesus.

[19 : 44] Let's pray together. our Father we thank you that even in a world of sadness of trouble of sorrow where there is so much that would cause us grief yet there is joy available for us.

We thank you that that joy comes through that baby born in Bethlehem born as God with us God incarnate born to be our saviour and one day returning and returning to reign.

We thank you for the prospect that many of us have of going to be with him and to be with him forever. Help all of us to have our trust in him help us to think much of him help us to rejoice in him this Christmas day.

We give you thanks for this time together we thank you for the privilege of singing these carols of thinking of your words and we commit ourselves to you in the name of the Lord Jesus.

Amen.