

## **Sermon 12 December 2021 – “What then should we do?” The reason for rejoicing is the nearness of the Lord!!!**

Lift up your heart, lift up your voice; Rejoice, again I say, rejoice! Words to the hymn that was just played.

“Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!” (Zephaniah 3:14)

“Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion” (Isaiah 12:6)

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice” (Philippians 4: 4)

Our readings today describe situations of judgment, disaster, waywardness and oppression. But linked to this is a very strong message of joy and rejoicing, clearly seen in our first three readings today. And this time of the year – the holiday and Christmas seasons that are upon us - certainly lends itself to festivities, celebrations and joy.

But this not the case for everyone. We live in a broken world – a world full of pain, poverty, injustice, lawlessness, depression, unemployment and now COVID – making it very difficult to live lives of joy. And the holiday season – the Christmas season - can be particularly difficult and painful for many people – the lonely, the depressed, those experiencing tenuous family relationships and the like. As Gordon Cosby puts it, “every person sits beside their own pool of tears”. And as a result, we tend to view/experience suffering and hardship as situations that are devoid of joy. Afterall, who feels like rejoicing when things are not going well?

And yet that is exactly what our readings call us to do. They invite us to reflect on and discover joy in the light of life’s challenges - in our current circumstances. True and lasting joy is not about achievement, fame or fortune. It is about embracing the reality of life, denying nothing, transcending pain and suffering. Like Paul in his letter to the Philippians. We know he is writing from prison and that he endured all kinds of hardships and yet he is able to say, “Rejoice in the Lord always (or at all times); again I say rejoice”. In a book he co-authors – The book of Joy – Archbishop Tutu says, “We are fragile creatures, and it is from this weakness, not despite it, that we discover the possibility of true joy. He goes onto say “Life is filled with many challenges and adversity...Fear is inevitable, as is pain and eventually death...” “Discovering more joy does not...save us from the inevitability of hardship and heartbreak. He says that as we discover more joy, we can face suffering in a way that does not make us bitter; rather we can experience “hardship without becoming

hard” and “heartbreak without being broken.” What challenging, yet inspiring and comforting words.

These sentiments expressed by Archbishop Tutu lie at the heart of our readings today - that joy is real and possible because our hardships and difficulties are overcome through God’s mercy and salvation. And this is certainly cause for rejoicing, for gratitude and celebration. These readings invite Israel, the Philippians and us to “rejoice, to not be afraid and to believe that God would bring healing and restoration” (Rev. Ginger E. Gaines-Cirelli: A sermon for every Sunday) Our reason for rejoicing goes much deeper than just having everything go right/well with our lives. It is rooted in the hope we have in God who loves us and restores us, who is among us and within us. The God of our salvation.

The Gospel reading does not speak about joy and seems to be a bit disjointed from the other readings. In fact, John’s opening remarks sound angry - “you brood of vipers” – and do not portray the idea of gentleness and understanding that Paul speaks about in the Philippians reading. These are certainly not words that fill one with joy.

Surprisingly, the crowd does not walk away from John’s harsh words – words of judgement. Instead they ask him “What then should we do?” (Luke 3: 10)

John the Baptist is proclaiming the Coming of our Saviour...and linked to this is the call to repentance – righting the wrongs / changing behaviour, moving away from our old ways to living transformed lives – at a personal level as well as at a communal/societal level. In verses 10 to 14 John responds with practical advice for preparing for the Lord’s coming – be generous; share; do not steal from others; do not take advantage of others, be content - produce “the fruits of a changed heart” These words invite challenging self-examination for us too because his response is not just about thoughtfulness and compassion; it is more than that. It is about salvation – “salvation that changes the terms of economic and social relations that seeks to address the needs of all people and recognize all as being part of God’s family.”

What then should we do? Pause for a minute and reflect on this question for yourself...How are we doing in the areas of justice, honesty, and generosity? Are we content with what we have, or do we seek more at the expense of others? Do we turn a blind eye to those in need? Believing it to be someone else’s responsibility – government, church, other family members - to deal with. In other words, how has the message of the coming Saviour changed you and me - changed our hearts and ways? It is not enough to

avoid what is forbidden but we should develop an attitude in everything that seeks God and what is good and when we do this we will experience that joy that wells up from within because God is the source of our action and God brings salvation.

I believe Douglas Abrams – one of the other authors of *The book of Joy* – sums it up nicely when he writes, “Ultimately, joy is not something to learn, it is something to live. And our greatest joy is lived in deep, loving and generous relationships with others.” (The book of Joy, pg. 348)

As we consider the question, “What then should we do?” in anticipation and preparation for the birth of Jesus at Christmas and his second coming may we be filled with joy that transforms our brokenness into wholeness.

“Lift up your heart, lift up your voice; Rejoice, again I say, rejoice!”

Amen.