

GPP Reflection for 15 December 2019

Congregational Story Time: Joy in the Nativity stories – Joy of Elizabeth and Zechariah
Luke 1: 5 – 25, 57 - 80

Reading: Matthew 11: 2 – 10

Before Reflection at Matawhero: Sing *Love Divine*. At St Andrew's: Sing *Hark the glad sound*

Reflection: SURPRISED BY JOY

- *Zechariah and Elizabeth – suspicious of joy?* - *John preparing the way – and seeing clearly*
- *are you prepared to be surprised by joy, to nurture wonder, & to dance the Way that Jesus taught?*

“Surprised by joy – impatient as the wind” is a line from a poem by William Wordsworth. I find that a thought-provoking image – that joy is as impatient as the wind. Perhaps it suggests that joy is swirling around us, breathing on us and inviting us to adventure? *Surprised by Joy* is also the title of one of the books written by C S Lewis. This is very different from most of his other books, especially the *Narnia Chronicles* and the *Screwtape Letters*, with which you may be familiar. In *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis tells the story of his early life and his conversion from Atheism to Christianity through his lifelong search for joy. He records the role of joy in helping him to find God.

I wonder whether experiences of joy have had a part to play for any of you in your spiritual journey and the development of your faith and your relationship with God?

Zechariah and Elizabeth were surprised by joy and they rejoiced and praised God as a result. Yet when the joyful news was first given to them that they would have a son, they were both quite suspicious of that joy. Zechariah heard the angel's message in the temple but he found it really hard to believe. The angel said *Because you have not believed my message, you will be unable to speak. You will remain silent until the day my promise comes true* – and that is indeed what happened. Zechariah left the temple unable to speak. He regained his voice, much later after his child was born, when he wrote ‘his name is John’. Everyone was surprised and at that moment Zechariah was able to speak again – and he started praising God. I imagine that over the long months of not speaking, Zechariah had much time to think. He could not converse with others but maybe he had many internal conversations with himself about life and his faith in God. As a result, Zechariah's song of praise began with ‘Let us praise the Lord, the God of Israel’. In his song of praise, Zechariah also shared the message he had been given about what his son John would do – be a prophet, preparing the way for the Lord.

When John grew up he did prepare the way for the Lord and in his work as a prophet, out in the desert where people flocked to hear him, John gave God's message to the people. That message was about repentance. The Biblical meaning of repentance is quite different from the widespread Christian understanding that repentance is about contrition, being sorry for your sins. The Biblical meaning of ‘repent’ is about turning to God.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament, the meaning of repent is shaped by the Jewish experience of exile. ‘Prepare the way of the Lord’, so central to Advent, is the path of return from exile to God. To repent, or return, is to follow the way that leads out of exile, out of separation, out of alienation and estrangement, and leads to reconnection with God. In the New Testament another layer of meaning is added to that reconnection. The root of the Greek word translated as ‘repent’ means ‘go beyond the mind you have, enter a new mind-set, a new way of seeing’. Repent thus means ‘to turn to God, see differently and change your action’. The nativity stories show us some examples of that kind of seeing differently that resulted in changed action - both the wise men and the shepherds were changed by their experiences. They turned to God in different ways. We have the symbolic words about the wise men that they went home by another road, they found a different path to travel – they discovered a new way.

We have thought about the birth of John on this advent day of Joy, but it is part of the introduction to the story of the birth of Jesus. That is what we are leading up to in Advent – the coming of Jesus into this world. John was sent to prepare the way for Jesus – so that people were ready to listen to him, and their hearts were prepared for a new way. Although all the gospels record that John baptised Jesus in the Jordan river, John himself later had some questions about Jesus. The reading we heard this morning from Matthew 11 is of a time when John had been imprisoned for daring to challenge the king with his words about repentance – he had dared to tell the king to turn to God and turn away from his evil ways.

While John was in prison, he heard about what Jesus was doing. John was frustrated that he was unable to see for himself, and sent messengers to find out if this really was the one for whom he had prepared the way. Jesus' response was to tell John's disciples to go back and tell him what they had seen of Jesus' ministry – how the Good News became reality in people's lives. They were on a new path, the new road John had prepared for. That was cause for joy and wonder. John could now see clearly who Jesus was.

The celebration of Christmas can be full of joy for us, bring light into our lives and nurture wonder. Joy, light and wonder are threads woven through the Christmas stories in the gospels. The symbolism of joy is significant in the coming of Jesus into the world, and we too can experience joy as we continually welcome and acknowledge God in our lives every day. Luke, for example, includes three individual songs of joy in the first two chapters - there is Zechariah's song of praise we thought about today, and Mary's song of praise, and then the joyful expression of Simeon when he meets the baby Jesus in the temple. There is also of course the joyful song of the angels visiting the shepherds.

The symbolism of light is also woven all through the stories – in the star, and angels, as well as the dawning of new understanding – and John's Gospel makes a more specific statement about Jesus being the Light of the World.

And then there is wonder, amazement, questions. Zechariah and Elizabeth, for example, were amazed at the news that they would have a son. Joseph, as we thought about last week, was amazed at the news Mary gave him and had all kinds of questions, and then full of wonder when he had a message in a dream. The shepherds wondered. The wise men wondered. Even Herod was amazed and questioned.

Maybe you wonder and have questions about the Gospel stories of the birth of Jesus. Wonder is something to be encouraged – because it helps us to stand in awe of God working in our lives, and to welcome mystery. If you do not find it easy to believe the stories surrounding the birth of Jesus actually happened in that way, may I encourage you to accept the wonder of it all and read them as stories with meaning and significance, that do not have to be accepted as being literally true. Their truth lies in what they tell us about God

Are you prepared to be surprised by joy, drawn into movement by the wind of the Spirit, and to nurture wonder in your lives? There is a lovely Christmas song, with words written by New Zealand Methodist Minister Bill Wallace, that finishes with these words “celebrate the Christmas wisdom, dance the Way that Jesus taught.” Dancing can show joy and celebration. Even if your limbs have trouble dancing, your heart can dance with joy because Jesus came to bring light into the world and show us God's way of living. God is with you. God bless you. Amen.

Response to God: Matawhero sing *Tell out my soul*
St Andrew's choir sings *When the child is at the centre*