

## SURPRISED BY JOY

### Readings: Isaiah 35:1–10; James 5:7–10; Matthew 11:2–11

Today, we lit the candle of Joy.

'I don't know if you use the word, 'joy' very often, I don't, but it's a word that's worth exploring – for a moment

The French have a phrase which I like, which refers to 'the joy of living' - '*joie de vivre*'

There is a joy of living that comes to us quite naturally. It is often unannounced, unexpected, may be even an undeserved joy. A joy that just comes to us without any effort on our part.

The *joie de vivre* is a delight, a gratitude, for the simple gifts of life.

I imagine birds and animals feel this same delight as they sing and go about their busy lives.

I get that joy of living when I'm doing something physically challenging, like walking up Te Mata Peak, or biking along the Napier waterfront, or swimming at a lovely beach. I experience the delight of simply being alive. (My scientific friends might put this 'joy' down to chemical endorphins). They're also right. Endorphins are part of who we are.

I have also experienced *le joie de vivre* when I've been on holiday, basking in the ocean somewhere, looking up at the sky overhead. And it doesn't even have to be sunny. I can feel the joy of living, even in the rain, under a grey overcast sky.

It is a joy that wells up 'on the inside' although it can be expressed on the outside. If you're an extrovert - you might want to shout your joy to the universe - the human version of a birdsong! You might want to shout or scream expressing your delight.

I'm not a very demonstrative person, although as a Samoan I've been brought up to smile and be friendly towards other people. Since a young age I've had to perform in church or perform in public functions. I've been brought up hugging and kissing people, but I've also been brought up with the Samoan habit of being respectful and controlling my feelings.

I've turned out to be what I'd call a 'semi-introvert'. I don't jump up and down about much. And when I cry, I tend to 'cry on the inside', first.

I laughed when another semi-introverted minister friend of mine sent out a message on his Facebook Page: 'Introverts of the world unite – but from your own bedrooms'.

The joy of living is a gift to both introverts and extroverts.

In 1955 C S Lewis published a book called, 'Surprised By Joy'. In that book, which CS Lewis wrote in his fifties, Lewis gave an outline of his journey from atheism to Christianity.

'Joy' – 'a deep joy', said Lewis, was one of the pointers or signposts on his journey to becoming firstly a theist, and then a Christian.

Joy was a signpost and not a destination, as it so often is today.

Today we tend to go out in search of joy or happiness and see it as the final destination.

Lewis chased that goal through literature, philosophy and personal experience. Others chase happiness through other means, money, cheap or daring thrills, the acquisition of prestige, or power. A fleeting kind of happiness.

We're all familiar with that adage: "As long as you're happy, that's the main thing!" 'Happiness is the goal'.

But is happiness the main goal in life? Or just a signpost or a by-product along the road to something greater, if we dare to pursue it, as CS Lewis did?

**Joy, you may recall, is one of the nine fruits of the Holy Spirit mentioned in Galatians 5: 22-23.**

*Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Generosity, Faithfulness, Gentleness and Self-control*

*The Joy of the Holy Spirit is not a fleeting, or shallow emotion.*

The New Testament uses the Greek word *chara* (pronounced *ka rah*) meaning: A deep, inner gladness rooted in God. A deep inner gladness that is not dependent on circumstances. A deep inner gladness which the Holy Spirit cultivates in the believer.

I believe every believer knows *chara/joy* in the Holy Spirit.

**In the Scriptures Joy is several things: I can think of at least 5 things that Joy is. Just briefly:**

- 1. Joy, as I have already said, is a Fruit of the Holy Spirit.**

2. **Joy is our response to God's saving action**, as we acknowledge God's acts of deliverance, healing, forgiveness and renewal in our lives, and in the life of the world. We experience joy.
3. **Joy is a posture of hope**. Biblical joy is not a naïve cheerfulness. It is the quiet, resilient confidence that God's future is trustworthy, even in times of sorrow.
4. **Joy is a communal reality**. The joy of the Spirit is shared, and is experienced in worship, in fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in serving others. Today we will share that Joy as we celebrate Holy Communion.
5. **Lastly, Joy is a foretaste of the Kingdom of heaven** that is already here and yet to come. We feel the joy of knowing God's love – and we know it is only the beginning of something greater. We are always in the hands/care of God.

**I won't say much about our other readings today, although each of them is an inspiration to faith.**

**Our first two readings today were about joyful expectations.**

**In Isaiah 35** we heard about a joyful transformation. You may have been able to visualize the reading as it was read this morning: The dry desert bursting into bloom. In God's new world, even the desert will bloom.

**In our second reading from James 5**, the hearers /readers are encouraged to wait for the coming kingdom which Christ will usher in. The kingdom is already here, but is also on its way. They are living the first instalment (as it were) of the coming reign of God.

**Our gospel reading**, contained the same sense of expectation, but definitely did not contain the same sense of Joy. It is a sad passage of scripture.

John the Baptist, who gave others so much hope, is now in prison for speaking out against King Herod. In prison, John is beginning to wonder whether Jesus really the Messiah is.

John may have expected Jesus to turn people against Herod and Rome and bring about a Jewish uprising /revolution, we don't know for sure.

We do know that John the Baptist sent his disciples to ask Jesus, 'Are you the one we've been waiting for?'

And Jesus didn't reply, 'Yes! Tell John I'm the One!'

Jesus replied by pointing at the acts of mercy he (Jesus) was performing:

Tell John: "...the blind receives their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the poor have good news brought to them".

Jesus was saying that the prophecy from Isaiah 61: 1-2 was being fulfilled, so 'yes'- he was the promised messiah.

Jesus had made Isaiah's prophecy his manifesto /mission:

"The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me...to bringing good news to the poor, to binding up the broken-hearted, to proclaiming liberty to captives and announce the year of the Lord's favour."

John would have been joyful when he heard Jesus' reply. He went to his death knowing that he had fulfilled God's purpose in his life and that he had played an important part in ushering in God's reign.

As we journey towards Bethlehem this year during Advent -

Can we look for, and pray for signs of renewal, where deserts begin to bloom as in Isaiah's vision?

Can we practice justice and mercy in our daily lives?

Can we wait with patience for God's kingdom that is here and yet to come?

Can we, like John the Baptist, recognize the Christ in the acts of compassion we can see around us every day?

I'd like to end with St Paul's Blessing in Romans 15.

"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing,

so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."

— Romans 15:13

May we all experience the joy that comes through knowing Jesus Christ as our promised Messiah.

Amen.

### **Prayer**

God of joy and returning strength,  
you make deserts bloom and open blind eyes,  
you lift up the bowed down and bring good news to the poor.  
Plant your word deep within us,  
that we may wait with the patience of the prophets,  
walk in the way of holiness,

and recognise the signs of your kingdom among us.  
Make us heralds of Christ,  
the One who is to come and who is already near.  
**Amen.**