**13th December 2015**

**Zephaniah 3.14-17; Luke 1.39-55**

On the third Sunday in advent the theme is Joy. We have looked at Hope and Peace in the last two weeks.

I had a joyful moment the other day. I was in a shop waiting to be served when I noticed near the till a locked cabinet full of perfume. Expensive perfume – anything from £30 to £90 a bottle. I had never paid much attention to the wording on these boxes before – but most of them had a bit of French on the front: ‘Eau de toilette’. My French is not that good but I do know that eau means water, de means of and toilette speaks for itself. Water from the toilet - £90! I let out a loud laugh in the shop causing the customer behind me to ask if I was OK.

For some, Christmas is not much fun. Those of you who have been following my posts on the church’s facebook page during these days of advent will know that I have been posting some biblical verses and some comments as a kind of short thought for the day. Over the last week I have posted a few comments that might strike a chord with some people who find Christmas all a bit too much. Douglas Coupland said that Christmas makes everything twice as sad. Charlie Brown said ‘I know nobody likes me. Why do we have to have a holiday season to emphasize it?

For many, Christmas is a time of dread. It just creates more hassle and stress and costs a lot of money they don’t have. Their lives are already a struggle and Christmas with all its expectations is the last straw – that can tip them over the edge. Others just see the artificial jollity that Christmas imposes on those around them and revolt.

In my last church I had a member who was one of life’s Eeyore’s: remember the character from Winnie the Pooh – the melancholic, pessimistic and miserable donkey called Eeyore. At the start of December every year he would start reading Dickens’ Christmas Carol in an effort to purge the Scrooge in him.

As you may recall A Christmas Carol tells the story of a bitter old miser named Ebenezer Scrooge and his transformation into a gentler, kindlier man after visitations by the ghost of his former business partner Jacob Marley and the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present and Yet to Come.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Scrooge hates Christmas, calling it "humbug"; he refuses his nephew Fred's Christmas dinner invitation, and rudely turns away two gentlemen who seek a donation from him to provide a Christmas dinner for the poor. His only "Christmas gift" is allowing his overworked, underpaid clerk Bob Cratchit Christmas Day off with pay – which he does only to keep with social custom, Scrooge considering it "a poor excuse for picking a man's pocket every 25th of December!"

At home that night, Scrooge is visited by Marley's ghost, who is forever cursed to wander the earth dragging a network of heavy chains, forged during a lifetime of greed and selfishness.

Marley tells Scrooge that he will be visited by three spirits, one on each successive evening, and that he must listen to them or be cursed to carry chains of his own that are much longer than Marley's chains. Scrooge is then visited by the three spirits Marley spoke of

The first of the spirits, the Ghost of Christmas Past, takes Scrooge to Christmas scenes of Scrooge's boyhood and youth, which stir the old miser's gentle and tender side by reminding him of a time when he was kinder and more innocent.

The second spirit, the Ghost of Christmas Present, takes Scrooge to several different scenes – a joy-filled market of people buying the makings of Christmas dinner, celebrations of Christmas in a miner's cottage and in a lighthouse. Scrooge and the Ghost of Christmas Present also visit Fred's Christmas party, where Fred speaks of his uncle with pity. He goes to Bob Cratchit's family feast, and is introduced his youngest son, Tiny Tim, who is full of simple happiness despite being seriously ill.

The third spirit, the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, shows Scrooge Christmas Day one year later involving the death of a "wretched man". The man's funeral will only be attended by local businessmen if lunch is provided. When Scrooge asks the ghost to show anyone who feels any emotion over the man's death, the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come can only show him an emotion of pleasure, from a poor couple indebted to the man momentarily rejoicing that his death gives them more time to pay off their debt.

The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come then shows Scrooge the man's neglected grave: the tombstone bears Scrooge's name. Sobbing, Scrooge pledges to the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come that he will change his ways in hopes that he may "sponge the writing from this stone".

Scrooge awakens on Christmas morning with joy and love in his heart. He spends the day with Fred's family and anonymously sends a prize turkey to the Cratchit home for Christmas dinner. The following day, he gives Cratchit a raise and becomes like "a second father" to Tiny Tim. A changed man, Scrooge now treats everyone with kindness, generosity, and compassion; he now embodies the spirit of Christmas. The story closes with the narrator repeating Tiny Tim's famous words: "God bless us, everyone!"

How can we be blessed this Christmas? How can we find joy? Using our bible passages and picking up some themes from Dickens let me offer you some thoughts.

The first thing to say is that Tiny Tim was onto something. God bless us everyone! Joy in scripture comes from the work of the Holy Spirit within us. Joy is a fruit of the Holy Spirit. In Luke’s gospel it is the filling of the Holy Spirit that causes joy for Elizabeth and joy for Mary. They rejoice in God their Saviour.

For many the word spirituality means having feelings of peace and contentment or optimism. For others it means belonging to or serving something greater than themselves- even if that’s just a social or political cause. What it rarely means is connecting with God. While semantics may be at play here, those who’ve walked with God for some time know that any spirituality is empty without God. It’s like sitting by a fireplace without a fire.

Jesus puts the fire back into the fireplace. Spiritual health and joy, deep down joy, is found in an intimate relationship with the God who is Father Son and Holy Spirit. Mindfulness courses may help settle our emotions, reconciliation programs may fix our relationships and it’s good to find causes to volunteer for. But true joy is built with divine power, by surrendering to the caring direction of God. Be filled with the Holy Spirit. If you come to God with arms folded reluctant and unwilling to receive help – thinking you have it all made – then you are not in a position to receive and be filled with the Holy Spirit. Mary and Elizabeth had humility to be filled with the Holy Spirit thereby experiencing joy.

The work of the Holy Spirit in bringing joy will do a number of things, roughly coinciding with the Spirit of Christmas past, present and to come.

First of all there is the joy of recollection. Both Mary and Zephaniah get joy from recalling the great deeds of God and how God has saved his people in the past.

Zephaniah says that we should be glad and rejoice with all our heart . The Lord has taken away your punishment he has turned back your enemy.

Mary responds by saying ‘My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed for the mighty One has done great things for me – holy is his name.

Recall those positive memories and moments

I was looking at photographs the other days from times past. I recalled one Christmas when I decided to cook Christmas dinner. The only time I have done so. I decided we would have goose. I remembered the stress of not knowing what I was doing and trying to get everything cooked in time and wondering if it would taste alright. The worst part was forgetting that there are two bags of giblets in the goose – in the bottom and also in the neck. I took the bottom giblet bag out but forgot about the one in the neck. About an hour later I detected a smell of burning plastic coming from the oven. I just managed to salvage the bag of giblets in the neck in the nick of time. A great disaster (no Christmas dinner) was only just averted. But as I looked at those photos I just smiled at the memory and selectively forgot the stress and anxiety of the time.

The forces that inspired Dickens to create a powerful, impressive and enduring tale were the profoundly humiliating experiences of his childhood and the plight of the poor and their children during the boom decades of the 1830s and 1840s and religious tracts about conversion.

In 1824, Dickens' father, John, was imprisoned whilst 12-year-old Charles was forced to take lodgings nearby, pawn his collection of books, leave school and accept employment in a factory.

The boy had a deep sense of class and intellectual superiority and was entirely uncomfortable in the presence of factory workers who referred to him as "the young gentleman". The devastating impact of the period wounded him psychologically, coloured his work, and haunted his entire life with disturbing memories.

Dickens both loved and demonised his father, and it was this psychological conflict that was responsible for the two radically different Scrooges in the tale—one Scrooge, a cold, stingy and greedy semi-recluse, and the other Scrooge, a benevolent, sociable man, whose generosity and goodwill toward all men earn for him a near-saintly reputation. It was during this terrible period in Dickens' childhood that he observed the lives of the men, women, and children in the most impoverished areas of London and witnessed the social injustices they suffered.

He used those bad memories for good. Instead of being imprisoned by them, like the heavy chains around Marley’s ghost, he used those experiences to lift the chains of others.

May I suggest to you that that’s a key to joy in the Christian life? A real key – to be able to recall the goodness of people, to be able to recall the best in someone, to be able to look past some of the glitches in life and capture the sweet memories. The heart where the joy of the Holy Spirit dominates, is a heart that touches the sweet things of life, not the bitter things. Selective memory is not a bad thing.

In Paul’s great letter to the Philippians he talks about joy all the way through the letter. He encourages us to think about those things that are lovely, pure, right, admirable, praiseworthy and the God of peace will be with us. We always have a choice with our memories as to how we use them and interpret them. Choose wisely. Learn to walk in the Spirit, learn to yield to the Spirit, and the Spirit of God has a way of erasing the tape of negative things. Ask the Spirit of God to erase those things, to produce in you a joy that focuses on joyful memories. That’s the work of the Spirit in the heart of the believer. Bitterness, unforgiveness, always remembering evil – that is the work of the flesh, holding grudges. As Thomas Hardy said, “Some people can find the manure pile in any meadow.” You want to live like that? You want to stomp around in that stuff all your life? Paul’s joy was expressed in pleasant memories. That is a basic element of joy. That’s the joy of recollection

Secondly consider the future. Mary and Zephaniah look forward to what God will do in the future. His mercy extends to those who fear him from generation to generation – so sings Mary. The Lord is with you; never again will you fear any harm’ declares Zephaniah (3.15).

A lot of people have their joy robbed from them because of fears for the future. Scrooge had to come face to face with his own death to overcome his fear of death and make a difference in the present. Fears can trap us: A mortgage creates a fear of non- payment; employers create fears of redundancy; other people’s expectations can create a fear of failure; religions can create a fear of judgement and hell. Groups and gangs create fear of difference. Magazines create fear of fatness. Noisy neighbours create fears of being watched and talked about. We fear losing our health. We fear everything falling apart.

Which, is why the message of the angels usually starts with four words: ‘do not be afraid!’ We need courage to find joy. We need courage to live. We need courage to trust.

Mary’s rejoices in the Lord her Saviour. Who fills the hungry with good things and lifts up the lowly. Her trust is not so much in herself or her circumstances but in God her Saviour. Her joy is in God and his promises. She will hold tight for the day of salvation. There will be trouble ahead – think of Mary’s life and her trials in watching her son ridiculed and then crucified. But she rejoices in the Lord – her hope is in God.

Scrooge got confronted with his own tombstone. Because of Christ we know that our tombstone is not the last word. We have the glorious promise and hope of everlasting life, of a new heaven and new earth. So what shall we fear?

The past and the future are important for our capacity to know joy in life. But they can also rob us of our joy.

Rob Parsons writes about how he went to a ‘Sounds of the Sixities’ Concert. He was born in the 1950 so he was up for a night of nostalgia and reminiscing about The Searchers, Freddy and the Dreamers and Manfred Man. When he got to the concert he was shocked by how old the audience were. At least they were old from the neck upwards, but they were still wearing leather bomber jackets, gold chains winklepicker shoes and pink socks. The next shock was the groups themselves. The lead singer of the Swinging Blue Jeans apologised that he couldn’t leap about because he had a bad back. No amount of make-up, toupees and on one ancient rocker brown head paint, could hide the fact time had touched his heroes.

The music was still great though but as he came out of the concert he realised that his teenage years weren’t as great as he remembered them. Girlfriends finished with him, maths teachers scared him, best friends hurt him and pimples attacked his face like barbarian hordes descending on the Romans.

Parsons writes[[2]](#endnote-2): ‘*the book of Ecclesiastes has a fascinating warning in it: ‘Don’t ask, ‘why were the old days better than these?’ it is not wise to ask such questions.’*

*‘There are two thieves of joy and they are sister and brother’*, says Parsons. ‘*The first is the one warned against in the old wisdom book: a rose tinted yearning that the past might return – better summers, snowier winters, trains that run on time, family Christmases without conflict. We sigh as we tell people how great life used to be.*

*Its sibling turns our eyes not back but forward. A friend of mine who is a clinical psychologist told me that most people believe a future event will make them happy – when I win the lottery, move house, or pass my exams. This can include even quite small events – when I get that new gadget or see my friends on Saturday night. But then he said, really happy people manage to grasp a little happiness now: because now is all we’ve really got. Somebody put it like this: ‘yesterday is history. Tomorrow is mystery. Today is a gift – that’s why we call it present’.*

*The two thieves of joy are a hankering after a perfect past on the one hand, and a yearning for a change of some kind in the future and they both steal the present. ‘*

Scrooge discovered the joy in the present by giving when he opened his heart to others and expresses concern for other people’s welfare not just his own.

Is it better to give or to receive – is an often asked question. Well we all like to receive – but I would argue there is more joy in giving. The more I observe people the more I see a connection between those people who are generous and have joy and those who aren’t and are deprived of joy. So you want to know joy? Then give. Give of your time, your talents and your money. Love. But love the right things. In his book the *Selfish Capitalist,* psychologist Oliver James reveals what happens when money, possessions and personal appearance become our prime concern: we suffer increased levels of depression, anxiety, aggression, narcissism, substance abuse, and a relationship breakdown. A materialistic life leads to sickness of the deepest kind – and that’s hardly a recipe for joy. Jesus said you can’t serve two masters: you cannot serve both God and money. When money and possessions come first in our hearts, our souls are robbed of light and our lives are filled with worry. Jesus remedy was a simple lifestyle and a focus on God and his kingdom.

Mary rejoices in God her Saviour. Zephaniah rejoices with all his heart in the Lord his King. May you rejoice this Christmas time in God your saviour. The God of the past, the present and the future.

1. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Christmas_Carol> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Rob Parsons, The Wisdom House, Hodder, 2014, p161-165 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)