

15th Dec 2013 – Advent 3 – 9am Wesley

Theme: “Joy”

Readings: Isaiah 35: 1-10 ‘The joy that will come for the people of God’
Matthew 11:2-11 “John’s hope that Jesus is ‘the One’”.

Introduction

One of the joys for me at this time of the year is the expectation of what is about to happen. We have celebrated it before but we continue to celebrate it. What is it? It is my wedding anniversary of course – I’d be in deep trouble if I hadn’t remembered that it was 39 years ago yesterday at Malvern Methodist Church in Adelaide that I married Annette Margaret Bowey, my teenage sweetheart!

What are some of the joys in your lives? The things/people/events that lift up you – for some it may even be memories that while joyful are also painful because of the loss of others. Think on this for a few moments. *(allow time for people to think and possibly respond)*

Readings

In the church year, with Advent 3, we are building towards the Christ event. There is an expectation. Like my wedding anniversary, we have celebrated this event many times but there is still a joy as we await Christmas Day. We build towards Christmas with the Advent candles, beginning with hope, then peace, today joy and next Sunday, love. It is hard to imagine a world where these four attributes are the guiding principles in all areas of life but this is part of the promises by God to the faithful people of God. This is the Christian ‘utopia’ in a sense laid out in our Scriptures given to us today in two of the set readings.

1. Isaiah 35: 1-10 is a chapter for the Jewish people caught up in the exile – those transported from their homeland to Babylon. This exile was in the period 587-538BC and here Duetero-Isaiah prophesies about their return. Scholars believe that this chapter should be in the section chapters 40-55 and has somehow been displaced over the centuries to the earlier section of Isaiah. Joy pulses through Isaiah 35 to a people of gloom and doom. A people seemingly forgotten by God, ignored, rejected which has left them down cast, feeling depressed, powerless and helpless. However the prophet gives hope and sounds the trumpet of joy. I love the transforming imagery at the beginning of the chapter:
“The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy.”(vs1)

Who has seen any one of our deserts blooming after rains? – it is a tremendous sight. Years ago I went between Tom Price and Karratha, on the mine road that follows the train tracks to that coastal port. To see acre upon acre of Sturt Desert peas and a host of wildflowers which had burst forth after tropical cyclone George had earlier swept through that region, was indeed a joy to behold. The prophet here is likening the return of the people to their homeland to the joy of the blooming desert after rain. A wonderful word picture.

For each of us, we may go through those parched desert times in our faith, in our lives, in tragedies with the loss of loved ones, broken relationships, illness etc, but here in Isaiah is a word of hope for each of us.

“...the redeemed and the ransomed (those the Lord has delivered from bondage) will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.” (vs 10)

There is the hope of last Sunday combined with the joy of today's reading.

2. Then we have the Gospel for today. An interesting mixture where John the Baptist is in prison and sends his disciples to ask the question of Jesus: “Are you the one who was to come or should we expect some-one else?” Matthew 11:3

This question is not for John but for his disciples. Jesus partially quotes Isaiah 35:5 and re-iterates indirectly that ‘he is the one’.

“Go back and report to John what you hear and see. The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the person who does not fall away on account of me.” (vss4-6)

Here is the good news that Jesus is the promised one. Here also is the challenge to ourselves that our faith is such that others do not fall away on account of us not presenting our faith in the way of Christ.

Conclusion

The issue of joy is one that some Christians struggle with personally because of what they have experienced in life. The joy of their faith has been damaged.

Just may be this is an area of ministry that needs more concentration on as we approach Christmas, which can be so difficult for many.

Yet here is encouragement. May we seek to be joyful this Christmas no matter what our personal circumstances are. It is a joy based on our faith and not on our personal circumstances. It is a joy based beyond ourselves on the God who gave unto us his Son, who died on a cross due to humankind, but by the graciousness of a loving God, rose again to offer forgiveness, hope and joy to all. Amen.