

# JOY TO THE WORLD

## Sermon at the Eucharist on Christmas Day

Readings: Isaiah 52. 7-10; Hebrews 1. 1-4 (5-12); St John 1. 1-14.

ON the night of the twenty-third of November 1654, the French philosopher Blaise Pascal had a powerful and unexpected experience of the presence of God. He tried to write down what had happened, and after his death the scrap of paper he wrote that night was found sewn into the lining of his coat. The words were fragmentary, almost incoherent. One word is repeated: joy. ‘Joy, joy, joy’, he wrote, ‘tears of joy’.<sup>i</sup>

Joy. It’s a Christmas word. ‘I bring you good tidings of great joy’. ‘Tidings of comfort and joy’. ‘Joy to the world’.

It’s a word worth thinking about; it doesn’t carry all its meaning on the surface. First of all, the message of the angel to the shepherds. The good tidings were that the Messiah had been born, a birth which fulfilled the hopes and longings of the people of Israel for hundreds of years past. And when the prophets of Israel spoke of the coming of the Messiah, they spoke of joy. In fact when the word occurs in the Old Testament it is overwhelmingly to do with the promised kingdom of God. ‘With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation’, we read in the Psalms.<sup>ii</sup> We had a glimpse of it in the reading from Isaiah:

Your sentinels lift up their voices,  
together they sing for joy;  
for in plain sight they see  
the return of the Lord to Zion.<sup>iii</sup>

So when the angel said to the shepherds, ‘I bring you good news of a *great joy* which will come to all the people’, this could mean only one thing, precisely what the angel went on to say: ‘for to you is born in the city of David a Saviour who is the Messiah, the Lord’.<sup>iv</sup>

Joy, then, is the defining quality of God’s kingdom. And although we use the word joy in many contexts, it’s surprising how often it still carries a spiritual connotation. A quick scan of a dictionary of quotations confirms this. The most memorable uses of the word in English are from the Bible or the Prayer Book, or by writers working in a consciously Christian tradition: Chaucer, Blake, Keats, Wordsworth, Eliot. Schiller’s *Ode to Joy*, memorably set to music by Beethoven and

sung today in many secular contexts, celebrates the joy of heaven. There is a hint of heaven about the word.

And this makes joy different from other words, such as happiness, or cheerfulness, or pleasure. Happiness is not the same as joy, because happiness is to do with circumstance. Cheerfulness is not the same as joy, because cheerfulness is a matter of temperament. Pleasure is not the same as joy, because pleasure is the result of sensation. Happiness, cheerfulness, and pleasure, are all good and God-given gifts; but joy is more than any of them. None of them could have done justice to what Pascal experienced when he met God that night. Only the word joy, incoherently repeated, could come close.

It was Wordsworth who coined the phrase ‘surprised by joy’, and C.S. Lewis took it up for the title of his autobiography. And joy is often like that, as it was for Pascal, as it was for Lewis, as indeed it was for the shepherds that Christmas night: surprising, unsought, unplanned. You, I am sure, have had moments like that; and so have I. But for most of us, those moments are fleeting, they are mere glimpses of a far-off place to which we might hope to find our way one day.

So what did the angel mean when he announced a great joy which would come *to all the people*; or what did Isaac Watts mean when he wrote ‘Joy to the world, your Lord is come’? How can this fleeting, private, personal encounter with joy be a global thing – or, as we might say today, go viral?

The message of the angel, the good tidings of great joy, what in Christian language we call the Gospel, is that the joy of God’s kingdom, the joy dreamt of by the prophets, the joy celebrated in the psalms, is there *for all people*. Every person can enter that kingdom. Every person can find that joy. For joy, as we have said, is more than happiness; it is more than cheerfulness; it is more than pleasure; indeed, God’s gift of joy can reach people even in the extremity of pain or fear or loss.

How can this be? The answer lies *in the manger*. That was where the angel directed the shepherds: ‘*You will find* a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger’. It was not enough for the shepherds to *hear* that the Messiah had been born; they must *go*; they must find him for themselves. Find the Child of Bethlehem and then follow him as he becomes the Man from Nazareth; follow him as he preaches the good news of God’s kingdom; see what happens to him then, and what happens after that:

Trace we the Babe,  
who hath retrieved our loss,

From his poor manger to his bitter cross;  
 Then may we hope, angelic hosts among,  
 To sing, redeemed, a glad triumphal song. <sup>v</sup>

The Child of Bethlehem, the Man from Nazareth, is the one who leads us into joy; but he leads us by the path he took himself. Joy was set before him (as we read in the Epistle to the Hebrews), and because of that joy he endured the cross and despised the shame of it; and to his faithful servants he says, ‘Enter into the joy of your Lord’. The phrase echoes the great cry of Nehemiah in the Old Testament: ‘this day is holy to the Lord; do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength’. <sup>vi</sup>

And that is why we dare to believe that joy can be found even when we have nothing to be happy about, nothing to be cheerful about, when our lives are more pain than pleasure. This is a hard truth which we must find for ourselves, as we follow in the way of Jesus Christ. It is not a bland truth to be handed out from a position of comfort to others who undergo hardship or pain. The joy of the Lord is not a sticking-plaster to apply to the ills of war or hunger or homelessness or poverty or bereavement or disease. Those who travel by such dark paths do not want to *hear* about other people’s joy. But the *example* of faithful followers of Jesus Christ, who themselves have been touched by joy in the midst of pain; who themselves, like the shepherds, have been surprised by joy in the middle of a dark night; who themselves have found that the joy of the Lord is their strength: that is good news of great joy which you and I can impart to all the world.

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Preached at the Sung Eucharist in Worcester Cathedral  
 on Christmas Day 2022.

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<sup>i</sup> Blaise Pascal, ‘A Memorial’, in *Pensées*, translated with an introduction by A.J. Krailsheimer, Folio Society, London 2011; p. 297.

<sup>ii</sup> Isaiah 12. 3.

<sup>iii</sup> Isaiah 52. 8.

<sup>iv</sup> Luke 2. 10f.

<sup>v</sup> John Byrom, ‘Christians, awake, salute the happy morn’.

<sup>vi</sup> Nehemiah 8. 10.