

## 2024 TALK, CAROL SERVICE, 15.12.24

### A SINGULAR CHRISTMAS – THE JOY OF ONE

Anyone here like a good procession? You know what I mean. Processions are associated with special occasions. With joyous celebrations. Like a wedding. Or a royal coronation. Similarly, a carnival is basically one big party in the form of a procession isn't it?. When we went to the Advent Service at St Albans Abbey, the other Sunday, it all started and finished with a procession... They do love a good procession our Anglican brothers & sisters... And there is good Biblical precedent for them – for example, right here in the opening of John's gospel. We will come back to this in a moment.

Of course, processions can get a bit tedious. They can take a LONG time... The audience is invited to stay in one place. You just have to stand & watch as lots of people, in different outfits come past. (The caravan ahead of the Tour de France is just like this... I've seen quite a few...). And they just keep coming. And coming... And you begin to think – 'What, there's more...?!'. But the secret of a good procession is that they keep building & building – to something more & more exciting. There is always something new & more captivating to see.

The opening verses of John's gospel might not seem like much of a procession. But that's exactly what it is. It proceeds, step by step, from one degree of glory to another. It starts (like the Book of Genesis) with something very simple – with Word and then with Light. The fundamental building blocks of human understanding & of all life. There's a spoken word, out of the darkness, which makes all things intelligible. Then light appears, which makes all things visible.

God gives light. Then we see a spotlight pointing to one man. We are introduced to this one individual, who has been sent as a witness to the light. It's clear that this man is just the 'warm-up' act to what is to follow. This is none other than John the Baptist, who went ahead of Jesus & announced the coming of God to the world. Immediately after we are introduced to the one who witnesses to the light, we are then introduced to the 'true light'. Light of the nations. Light of all the world. Light of life. And here we stumble over one of the most extraordinary Bible verses we are ever likely to read. This is the very heart of the mind-blowing good news of Christmas: *'The Word became flesh & made his dwelling among us... We have seen his glory, the glory of the One & Only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace & truth'*. If there ever

was a single verse of scripture you want to spend the rest of your life meditating on, it is this one... (I could recommend one or two others also!).

The secret of celebrating a 'singular Christmas' is this. To make sure your Christmas is extraordinary, make sure to celebrate 'the joy of One'...

Firstly, our One God. Our Heavenly Father is the source of all good things & all joy. Anything that's good in our lives comes from God, the beginning & end of the rich & glorious procession of life. Alleluia! This Christmas, let's begin & end with God, with joy. Start every day, finish every day - by giving thanks to the 'giver of all good gifts'...

Secondly, we start with 'this one'. We begin with ourselves & where we find ourselves. Each of us is called, like John the Baptist, to be a witness to the light. Each of us are called to receive Jesus, Light of the World. Each of us is called to be children of God. If you haven't received Jesus yet – you can do just that this Christmas... You can put your trust in Jesus. You can give your life to Jesus, because he loves you. He proved that by coming to this world & by being ready to die for you... Thanks be to God. **You** can know the joy of being a child of God. **You** can know the joy of having God as your Heavenly Father this Christmas.

Thirdly, we begin & end each Christmas with the One. The One & Only Jesus, who brings the joy of light to all those living in thick gloom & darkness. There is no-one else who can do this, in such a remarkable & universal way. Joy to the world! Our God has come! Jesus doesn't simply bring God to our planet. Jesus brings a new humanity to our world. Thanks be to God! Alleluia!

So much to rejoice in & be joyful about at Christmas time. **Even this** Christmas time, with all the doom & gloom which seems to surround us today. There may be some here who can't think of much to be joyful about right now. If that's the case for you this year, remember that God has given you joy in the past. God wants to bring you joy today & tomorrow. To restore the joy of your salvation. The simple joy of knowing God's love, shining in **your** heart.

Earlier in our service we tried to identify particular things about our Christmas celebrations which bring us joy. This is good psychology. It's healthy for us. In the same way, when we are sad, it is important to try to understand exactly what we are feeling & why. But we should make just as much effort to put our finger on anything that brings us joy. To make sure, each day, to celebrate the good things in our lives. 'Count your blessings, count them one by one, and it will surprise you what the LORD has done'...

A leading mind of the last century was C.S. Lewis. He was a confirmed atheist, a confirmed bachelor, who astonished himself when he came to faith in Jesus. He was equally astonished when much later he got married, to a vivacious woman called Joy Adamson. His autobiography is fittingly called: 'Surprised by Joy' ... How will God surprise you with joy this Christmas, I wonder... ? How will God give you the bespoke gift of joy, in the coming days? A gift of Christmas, which is for you?...

To finish, let me remind you of the story of the shepherds & Mary from Luke's gospel. Here's two - very different - pictures of joy. The shepherds, let's not forget, had heard a choir of angels in the night. The mysterious stars & galaxies they stared at every night, were also singing along with the angels. They went to see this sight, in a barn in Bethlehem. And came home loudly rejoicing, almost as if they were a party of drunks, coming home from a night out. But it was the joy of the LORD. The joy of the LORD helped them find their voices. The joy of the LORD helped them share this good news with everyone they met. Good news of a baby boy, a special gift of God, born for them, no less.

How does Mary respond? Also with joy, but very differently. She is full of gladness. She treasures up all these things & ponders them in her heart... How will you experience the joy of Christmas this year?. Will it be loudly, like the shepherds, or more quietly like Mary? Or in some other way perhaps? Where is your treasure this Christmas? How will you treasure it & share it this Christmas?

Let us finish with the words of the prophet Isaiah, the prophet Jesus himself quoted most often:

'The people walking in darkness have seen a great light – on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned... For to us a child is born, to us a Son is given...'. Thanks be to God for the brilliant & glorious good news of Christmas!