

Sermon 12 December 2021 - Advent 3 - Philippians 4: 4-7, Luke 3:7-18

- We are exactly half-way through Advent - today we lit a different coloured candle - a pink one - on our Advent ring, which reflects the pink vestments originally worn by the priest on this day in Advent when we recognise the feeling of joy in the midst of this reflective season awaiting the coming of Jesus.
- This Sunday also goes by the name of Gaudete Sunday- Gaudete means “rejoice” in Latin - so the reading from Philippians is hugely appropriate- telling us to Rejoice!
- But sometimes we come to church and the mood of the service isn’t what we are feeling personally.
- If the day is encouraging us to be joyful - such as Christmas or Mothering Sunday, or Easter or today, Gaudete Sunday, we may,.. because of our personal circumstances, actually be feeling anything but joyful.
- We may be grieving, extremely stressed, anxious or in ill health. The financial stresses that Christmas brings may be worrying us; we may feel overwhelmed by the world’s crises, or our work/life balances and feel we don’t have enough hours in the day to do everything we want to or need to.
- Huh, now that I’ve pointed out all these negative thingsdo any of you actually feel joyful at this precise moment?
- Don’t despair if you don’t!
- There is help at hand in our reading from Paul’s letter to the Philippians.
- I love this passage and think it is one of the most positive and empowering in the bible :
- “*Rejoice in the Lord always*” - Paul is calling his Philippian friends not just to be joyful in their lives but tells them how joy can be found – “*in the Lord*” - in the God, who loves us more than we can imagine - surely that is a reason to rejoice - we have this eternal, unconditional love being poured out into our lives from the God who loved us so much He sent us Jesus, and as Christians we are aware of it and the more we can turn our lives towards that love, the more empowered we will feel to follow God , follow Jesus and find self-esteem and fulfilment, and feel valued and loved, joyful and thankful.
- “*The Lord is near*”- don’t despair - God is here , Jesus walks beside us in all that we do, if we focus on him we will never feel alone, we can always ask for strength and guidance.
- That is the very next part of the passage: Don’t worry : PRAY! Just say a prayer for reassurance when you meet a difficult situation, ask God to help you,
- Lord God , help me. What do I do now? Please give me the words. Please keep me calm.
- “*The Lord is near*” - he is the living God, not a distant God. He is a loving God, he will always be there when we turn to Him, when we say sorry, when we want to make amends, when we know we need him. He will never give up on us, however many times we mess up, however much help we need to be healed and to be transformed and find new life.
- Rejoice in the Lord - even if you don’t feel very joyful- turn your hearts and minds to God, block out other thoughts and concentrate fully on God’s love for you and hopefully you’ll find a uplift in your mood.
- And if we do keep turning to God in prayer, talking to him as a friend, asking his advice, asking for help, asking for comfort or even just being aware of his presence with us in silence, in the beauty of the natural world , we will find moments of peace - the peace of God which surpasses our understanding - a peace which nourishes, which heals, which enables us to move forward with the confidence of our Lord being near at all times.
- And when we feel restored and strengthened, we will be able to look at our lives more calmly and let God work through us to help bring in His kingdom - we will have the stable base to do the things John the Baptist was urging people to do to show they really had repented after being baptised by him in the river Jordan.

- We will be able to give possessions to those who have much less than us- maybe taking items to charity shops, giving money to charities providing food and clothing to the homeless and the global poor; we will be able to be generous to others, we will be able to feel more satisfied with what we have and thank God for our blessings, rather than strive for excessive amounts of money and material things, which after all are going to damage the planet and through that, millions of people.
- We will be able to find joy in looking at things through the Lord's eyes, we will be able to find joy in serving Him, in helping others and making a difference to another person..
- We, as followers of Christ, will let our baptism through the Holy Spirit set our lives aflame for God's kingdom, God's values. And by doing so find joy - rejoicing in the Lord and gradually we will begin to feel an inner peace, maybe a freedom from ever-present technology or peer pressure dominating our lives. *"The peace of God will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."*
- *"You brood of vipers"* – John's words of incredulity that the greedy sinful people had turned out to get baptised – maybe because they saw everyone else doing this- let's follow the crowd, it's the in-thing to do, sounds exciting- but they hadn't thought it through, they hadn't realised the consequences of baptism.
- But John the Baptist was a messenger from God and despite his initial frustration and contempt, he didn't refuse to baptise anyone but he gave them practical pointers to help them repent- it was then their choice if they continued to be greedy, self-centred and only looking after themselves and their own.
- *'Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.'* ¹² *Even tax-collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, 'Teacher, what should we do?'* ¹³ *He said to them, 'Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.'* ¹⁴ *Soldiers also asked him, 'And we, what should we do?' He said to them, 'Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.'*
- Are we and those in authority just as much a brood of vipers as those people John called out?
- Quoting rules but not following them ourselves as they cramp our partying nature.
- Burying our heads in the sand by continuing to use fossil fuels - to run our vehicles and heat our homes.
- Surely, we are that brood of vipers when we don't stand up for the vulnerable,
when we don't try to make the world a better place,
when we don't take drastic measures to address climate change
- So let us at least wake up, repent, and act without greed and self-centredness, act for the good of others, lead by example, stand up for God's values when we see hypocrisy and be strengthened by our trust and belief in a God who desperately *WANTS* to save us - remember He sent us Jesus - not just to be an adorable little baby, who may or may not still have a place on some of your Christmas cards,
but to be our Saviour, to take our sins upon himself, die and be raised to new life.
- ***"Rejoice in the Lord always. The Lord is near!"***
Jesus is always with us, whatever we face.
With him there is always hope and the right kind of power.
- Amen