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Sermon

Joy and Jesus' Manifesto

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

13th December 2020

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Through Advent we are encouraged to remember his first coming and prepare for the second coming. This 3rd Sunday in Advent has the theme of joy.

It is a joyful thing to welcome Jesus. The reading from Isaiah is a manifesto if you will of the Messiah's programme. Of course Jesus claimed it for himself when he started his ministry. He is sent "to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour and the day of vengeance of our God..."¹ Two purposes – two adverts. On the first time, Jesus proclaimed the year of the Lord's favour using these words from Isaiah but stopping at that point. On the second coming, he will bring the day of vengeance – when wrongs are righted and justice is done.

The year of the Lord's favour is a reference to the Year of Jubilee. It was laid down in the Jewish Law that every fifty years there was to be a year when there would be rest in the land, everyone was to return to his family land, debts were to be forgiven, slaves were to be set free and land was to be returned to its original owners. Dr Merrill Unger wrote, "In this year, every kind of oppression was to cease and every member of the covenant people find his Redeemer in the Lord, who brought him back to his possession and family."²

The Year of Jubilee was a practical example of what it would be to be redeemed. Under Christ's rule, there will be freedom from oppression. The year of Jubilee applied that to restoration of family relationships, freedom from debt, restoration of tribal and family land and freedom for those who had become enslaved.

In Isaiah's prophecy it is also applied to broken-heartedness, imprisonment, mourning.

What does the Spirit of God mean by saying the Messiah is sent "...to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair?"³

Is it a practical outworking of the exchange of the cross? Is it that Jesus bears our mourning, our grief? Isaiah says in chapter 53:

"He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and

¹ Is 61:2

² Unger M.F., 1985, *Unger's Bible Dictionary*, Moody Press, Chicago; (Article on *Festivals I.4*) p354

³ Verse 3-4

afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.”⁴

Is it that he offers to carry our suffering and give us in exchange his gladness, his praise, his beauty? These people he redeems are to be restored by God and established in their land. They will rebuild it and lead the nations. The first coming of the Messiah deals with the spiritual issues of destruction. But on the second Advent there will be a government under which righteousness and peace will flourish.

This looks rather like the Millennium rule of Christ to me. Regardless, as children of our father we will want the things of his heart. So we too will be seeking to ensure that righteousness and peace are hallmarks of our lives and dealings with others – as far as it lies with us. We cannot always achieve it but we can aspire and work towards it.

The Epistle contributes to our understanding of living like this. And what Paul writes here is directly related to the question of how we should live as we wait for the second coming. The chapter starts, back in verse one, with Paul repeating what Jesus had said about no one knowing when the Day of the Lord will come. Like Jesus, he encourages us to be alert and watchful.

What follows is instructions for living in the knowledge that Christ will come again.

⁸ ... [put] on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him.

We need hope. I preached on that two weeks ago. Through difficult times, through times of waiting we need hope to give us some real and positive to look forward to. Paul assures us that the coming of the Lord is not about judgement for Christians but the fulfilling of our salvation. Jesus died for us therefore we can live with him.

We have the hope of seeing Jesus, we have the hope of the wonderful resolution of all things that Isaiah describes in his prophecy we heard today; we have the hope of glory. Hope is to be our helmet. A helmet protects the head – hope protects our thinking and our attitude.

Then faith and love are to be like a breastplate to us. Whereas hope looks to future positive expectations, faith is what we have already although unseen. When we trust Jesus as our Lord and Saviour we have confidence in him, his salvation, his goodness to us, his care and provision, his protection.

In the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus taught us to pray for our daily bread – our needs - and that we be delivered from evil. Such faith protects our hearts – the seat of will and emotions.

This is the context of our Epistle reading, where Paul wrote:

¹⁶ Be joyful always; ¹⁷ pray continually; ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

These then are instructions for living while we wait for the Second Coming. And the theme of joy heads it up – “Be joyful always; pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances.”⁵ When Paul speaks of praying always, he doesn’t mean speak constantly rather we are to remain aware of God – in touch with him. Rather like working companionably with a spouse or dear friend - you are not always talking (well most of us anyway) but you are aware of the other and sensitive to their actions, wants and emotions. How much more we need to stay in touch with him, turning our thinking and wills towards him and his ways.

These are not pious impracticalities – they are foundations for this way of life. Joy is not the same happiness. Happiness is generated by our circumstances. Joy arises inside out of who God is and what he has done in our lives. In the same way, thankfulness arises out of trust in God’s good purposes for us, whatever the circumstances. We make the choice to be joyful and thankful.

⁴ Isaiah 53:3-5

⁵ 1 Thess 5:16-18

Margaret Hopkins was a member of this congregation before she died in 2012. She was notably even remarkably joyful. I asked her to share her secret before she died and this is what she wrote:

I've had some tough times in my past - a divorce which left me with 2 teenagers to rear, a career that ended with redundancy, several severe illnesses, a disastrous financial investment that left me virtually penniless followed closely by two strokes in my 50's, which meant a complete stop to my earning capacity, and now I've got terminal cancer in my 60's. Enough to make one sorry for oneself?

But no, I have chosen to be joyful - partly because I have wonderful children and grandchildren and am richly blessed by my many friends and relations, but above all because I have chosen Christ to be foremost in my life. I remember after the strokes I was sitting in the doorway of my flat catching whatever breeze I could in the heat of the day and I was reading the book of Job. It mirrored my own miserable state and tears rolled down my face at his woes and mine. Then I read the final verses and prayed to God for the same steadfastness Job had shown and I was blessed by ecstatic joy as I came to realise that never-failing belief in Him was the answer. I had gone through terrible depression and had suicidal thoughts but with the help of counselling and my St Stephen's friends, I came back to joy.

Since then, I have chosen to be positive and joyful in spite of everything. I have learnt the positive benefits of encouraging everyone around me and my greatest pleasure comes from the smallest positive uplifting of other people.

I know that at the end of my life on earth I will know the ultimate joy of being with my Lord in heaven. Faith in Him is the key to my everlasting joy. I know that He always answers our prayers but not always as we wish. I know that dozens pray for me (I can feel it!) and He has given me such peace and joy, although no actual healing of the cancer has taken place. Surely though, the blessings He has given my spirit are more than anyone could wish for. When one is healed spiritually one becomes a healing channel for God. Spiritual healing not only deepens and strengthens one's faith but it also fills you with the desire to be used by God in helping others. I believe that apart from Christ I can do nothing, so I declare my complete dependence on Him. Faith in Him is my key to wonderful peace and absolute joy. If I can pass on to other people a modicum of the joy, peace and love, well then, my time on earth has not been wasted.