



Sermon

Hope, Peace, Joy, Love - the Attendants of Christ

Isaiah 35:1-10; Matthew 11:2-11

11th December 2022 - Advent III

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As we go through Advent each year, we have Advent candles reminding us of hope, peace, joy and love. I want to look at these four ideas today and touch lightly on John the Baptist and Jesus.

Hope

I have often said that Biblical hope is not wishing. It is a positive expectation of a future event. There is an expression Paul uses which used to confuse me, but now I think explains hope well. He was writing about Abraham believing the promise God had made him that he and Sarah would have a child in their old age. In the Revised Standard Version, it said, "In hope he believed against hope..."¹

What does that mean? Well, it is easier to understand if you use the synonym 'expect'. He expected against expectations. When all normal expectations said this was not going to happen, he still expected it. Why? Because God had promised it to him.

Hebrews 6:19-20 We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, ²⁰ where Jesus, who went before us, has entered on our behalf.

As an anchor prevents a boat from drifting in the windblown waves. How does it do that? By locking onto the seabed and holding the boat steady. So our hope in God's promises is like an anchor. It is secured into eternity and stops us from drifting.

Biblical hope is deeper than common ideas of hope. The word in Hebrew word for hope (*tikvav*) has other meanings of expect, look for and wait. They add richness to our understanding of hope. When we are waiting what we hope in, this teaches us to have expectancy not dull resignation. *Tikvav* is waiting on tiptoes.

Peace

Last week, the Advent theme was peace. Peace also goes deeper than our usual understanding. Our usual experience of peace is dependent on circumstances. When things are going our way, we are peaceful. When we are threatened or disappointed, we lose our peace. Old Testament peace was *shalom*. *Shalom* is broad reaching in its scope. It is about well-being, soundness, prosperity, welfare.

¹ Romans 4:18

But the peace Paul points us to in Philippians 4 is not dependent on circumstances. It is the peace which passes understanding.

Philippians 4:6-7 Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

When God gives peace, it is not dependent on the circumstances of life. It is based on his faithfulness and dependability. Have you known times when you been in a challenging situation and you suddenly realise that you are peaceful in spite of it. When it dawns on you – I should be anxious but I'm not; I'm calm – you have recognised the peace which passes understanding.

Love

Looking ahead, the theme of love comes next week. Once again, it is a much richer idea in the Bible than we commonly consider. We have come to use the word 'love' casually for liking something like icecream or merely agreeing with what someone else says.

But the Biblical ideas of love are far more meaningful. Agape love is self-giving; it seeks the best for the one loved, unconditionally.

Dr Jim Packer wrote:

The Greek word agape (love) seems to have been virtually a Christian invention -- a new word for a new thing (apart from about twenty occurrences in the Greek version of the Old Testament, it is almost non-existent before the New Testament). Agape draws its meaning directly from the revelation of God in Christ. It is not a form of natural affection, however, intense, but a supernatural fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22). It is a matter of will rather than feeling (for Christians must love even those they dislike -- Matt. 5:44-48). It is the basic element in Christ-likeness.

The highest description of this *agape* love comes from Paul's writings when he wrote to the Corinthian Church.

1 Corinthians 13:4-8 Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. ⁸ Love never fails.

It is worth reading that passage once substituting Jesus for love and seeing how well the description fits. Then it is sobering to read it again, putting one's own name in place of love and see how well one's character measures up to this standard.

Truly, Biblical love, the love of God, the love of Christ is at a higher level.

Joy

So, we come back to today's Advent theme of joy. Joy is greater than happiness. Happiness is dependent on circumstances. But joy wells up from relationship with God. Again, it is rooted in who he is and what he promises.

Isaiah looks forward to the coming of the Messiah in Chapter 35 with the expectation of great joy.

¹The 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**.

¹⁰... the ransomed of the LORD 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.

Joy is an entirely appropriate response to the coming of God. I hope you have experienced joy when you have had some sense of God with you or a connection with him.

In the gospel reading, Jesus has been ministering for a while and John the Baptist has been arrested for strongly condemning the ruler for his immorality. As he waited in prison, it seems he started to wonder whether Jesus was the Messiah after all. So, he sent some of his disciples to ask Jesus. Jesus simply compared his actions to this portion of Isaiah. Isaiah had written that when Messiah comes

⁵ Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. ⁶ Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.

All these miracles were happening in Jesus' ministry. So, Jesus can say: "⁵ 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."

So, his answer to John was yes you were right. Don't despair. And when I don't look the way you expected don't be offended.

John himself is an example of one who had great joy at the coming of Jesus. Let me take you to two passages about John and Jesus. The first is when Jesus is newly conceived in Mary's womb and Elizabeth is six months pregnant with John.

Luke 1:39-45 At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, ⁴⁰ where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴² In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the child you will bear! ⁴³ But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!"

The approach of Jesus even in the womb caused Elizabeth to be filled with the Holy Spirit and the unborn John to leap for joy. Now compare that with this account from John's gospel. John has announced Jesus and both of them are ministering and both are baptising – it is before John's arrest.

John's disciples come to him concerned that Jesus is baptising more people than John is.

John 3:27-30 ²⁷ To this John replied, "A man can receive only what is given him from heaven. ²⁸ You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of him.' ²⁹ The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. ³⁰ He must become greater; I must become less.

John likened his relationship to Jesus to that of a best man to a bridegroom. He is there to help and support the groom not to take his place. But then notice he says the best man is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. Literally, he said, the best man rejoices with joy. That says there is a lot of joy. John went on to say that he was experiencing that strong joy and his joy was complete or filled up.

So as an unborn child, little John leapt for joy when the unborn Jesus came close. As an adult, he again was filled to the brim with joy on hearing Jesus' voice.

I have maintained that these qualities of hope, peace and love are the higher forms of these human experiences. So too with joy. The Apostle Peter wrote of the great joy experienced by Christians – he called it inexpressible joy. This is joy which cannot be described.

1 Peter 1:6-9 ⁶ In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.

I note that Peter recognises that joy can be experienced in hostile circumstances.

⁷ These have come so that your faith--of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire--may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed. ⁸ Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, ⁹ for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Peter tells those early Christians, and down the centuries, he tells us that receiving salvation is the greatest joy for which we cannot find words. I know the evening I came to Christ, all I wanted to say for the next half hour or so was, "Thank you Jesus, praise you Jesus." I didn't have words to express the joy and gratitude which flooded through my being.

So, there we have these four Advent qualities – all of them far surpass normal human experience:

- Hope which anchors the soul.
- Peace beyond understanding.
- Joy unspeakable.
- Agape Love.

As we have seen all these spring from relationship with God. So it is most appropriate that they form as it were the supporters in the Advent wreath for the central candle – the Christ candle. It is from him that they spring, on him they depend, to him they point.

Now "to him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy-- to the only God our Saviour be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and for evermore! Amen."²

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² Jude 25

