

Sunday 12th December 2021 – Third Sunday of Advent: JOY (Isaiah 55:1-13)

On the wall of the hall at our sister church of Christ the King, Kent's Hill there is a small poster spelling the word JOY – J-O-Y. It was designed by one of the young people's groups, and each of the letters stands for something: **Jesus, Others, Yourself**. I noticed this poster every fortnight for 6 years as part of the team which ran the Rock Solid group and I remember it struck me often: is this the definition of Joy? Is that the key: Jesus first, then Others, then Yourself?

It has often been observed that joy is different to happiness. It might include happiness, but it goes deeper. **Happiness depends on our circumstances, but joy is able to transcend them**. We can feel joy even when things aren't great, because joy relies on fundamental realities which don't change even when our situation does.

Joy is possible because as people of God we are citizens of another kingdom, which lives in the light of deeper truths: that God loves us, that we are special, that we are made for eternity, that we are destined to live in God's light and love for ever. Like being in a dark bedroom on a summer's day, we know there is a different and better reality to the darkness we might feel now.

As I reflected this week, I think that kids' poster is right. Joy does begin with Jesus, because he is source – the access point, if you will – of all these deeper truths. And this takes us to the heart of our passage for today. These wonderful passages of Isaiah which illuminate our Advent Season all point towards the Messiah, and today we get to the wonderful invitation of God: Come. Come. Come to me, God says – in fact to make sure we get the message he says it four times in verse 1. Come!

But, you might say, I don't know 100% if it's true... Come, Jesus says, all you who are thirsty.

But I can't offer God anything... Come, Jesus says you who have no money, I'll feed you anyway.

But I've always been so far from God... Come, Jesus says, because God is near.

But I don't know if God can forgive me... Come Jesus says, for our God will freely pardon.

But if God really knew what I was like, he wouldn't want me. Come, Jesus says, because God is not like us, his ways are higher than our ways, and his thoughts than our thoughts.

But what if I don't change, what if I can't become a better person?... Come, Jesus says, because my word does not return to me empty, but achieves the purpose for which I sent it.

We can always find reasons not to come, which is why God needs to repeat it so often. But God is persistent. Come anyway, he says. You made a mess of life – come anyway. You came to God before but wandered away and are worried if he'll give you another chance – come anyway. You find faith hard and life even harder – come anyway.

Israel made a mess of things for centuries – but this passage is God's love letter, their invitation home. Come, God says, come anyway.

Here is the true source of joy. Jesus came into this world. And he came especially for weak, unsteady disciples whose cheese is falling off their cracker. Jesus came for all who need second, third, fourth and thirtieth chances. Jesus offers a way home.

And to those who come, what a promise to finish today's passage – 'you will go out in joy'. Of course we will, because the Master is inviting us to come home. Jesus first – then others, and finally ourselves. J-O-Y – joy.

And not only that – 'you will go out in joy... and be led forth in peace. It will be as if the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, the trees will clap their hands.' What a fantastic image. For those of us who've heard the wind whistling through the trees this week, take a moment to try and imagine this as an arboreal round of applause to God's love and glory.

Joy is in short supply at present. But Jesus invites us to come, today, and receive his joy. It's a gift, it's a truth, it's something that can go beyond our present wretched circumstances.

Come – come to the waters, come and find life! Amen.