

Joy to the World – Christmas Day (St Michael's)

Isaiah 52:7–10; Psalm 98; Hebrews 1:1–12; John 1:1–14

How beautiful is the car pulling up in the driveway when loved ones are expected home for Christmas.

How welcome is the sound of the phone ringing when the birth of a child is imminently expected.

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news.

Did anything strike you about today's readings? I was immediately struck by the absence of any mention, on this Christmas Day, of the birth of Jesus.

Our readings today are for a "later in the day" service for Christmas Day. The readings from last night and earlier this morning tell the Christmas story in all its familiar detail, and now the readings we have just heard tell us some more of what that story is all about.

The reading from Isaiah begins with how beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news. I suspect that those feet were really tough, calloused, and dirty. Why were those tough feet beautiful? They brought news that those who had suffered exile and the loss of all they held dear were about to be saved, rescued, and restored. The message was one of peace, good tidings, salvation, and the sovereignty of God.

How great is this message? So great that the people will shout for joy and burst into songs of joy.

Joy is not just a feeling but a deep response to the love of God.

Psalm 98 reinforces this message of joyful response to God's love and faithfulness.

*Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth,
burst into jubilant song with music;
make music to the LORD with the harp,
with the harp and the sound of singing,
with trumpets and the blast of the ram's horn—
shout for joy before the LORD, the King.*

*Let the sea resound, and everything in it,
the world, and all who live in it.
Let the rivers clap their hands,
let the mountains sing together for joy;
let them sing before the LORD,
for he comes to judge the earth.
He will judge the world in righteousness
and the peoples with equity.*

Isn't that a wonderful psalm? It expresses the joyful response to God so vividly that we can almost hear the earth singing and feel the trees dancing.

The message of Christmas is also one of peace, good tidings, salvation and the sovereignty of God. God's love for the world and relationship with God's people are a cause for joy and celebration. How much did God love the world? The familiar words of John 3.16 tell us that God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

We have spent the season of Advent in expectation and anticipation of the coming of God's Son, the coming of Jesus – his coming into the world as a little child, and his coming in judgement. The loving gift of God's self, and the advent of God's justice and righteousness, are both occasions for joy.

Today is the day we celebrate the first of these comings – the birth of Jesus. The readings from Hebrews and from John's Gospel tell us who this little child was, and is, and will be, for eternity.

Jesus was born as a little baby in a place made not for princes or even for more humble people but for animals. He came in poverty and humility but also with the glory of God.

Jesus was and is God's Word – God's message. John tells us that, *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*

Jesus and the Father are One, with the Holy Spirit. We talk of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier – but also one God. Jesus is both God's Word and God eternal.

The letter to the Hebrews was written to those who were fully familiar with the God of the Old Testament, familiar with God's sovereignty, power, love, and faithfulness – the kingdom, the power and the glory if you like.

Today's reading of Hebrews Chapter 1 is full of allusions to the God of the ancient scriptures and psalms, and also gives a message entirely consistent with that of John's Gospel. It shows that just as God had spoken through the prophets, now God spoke through his Son – the Son who was one with the Father – the Son who was, like the Father, heir and creator of all things, and who was God made visible, God dealing with human sin, God the sovereign ruler.

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.

And in verses 8 and 9, *“Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever; a sceptre of justice will be the sceptre of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy”*

And so we return to the theme of joy.

Christmas may not always be a time of joy. For many people there may be family tensions or sorrows. This may be a time when loved ones are particularly missed. However, God’s message also brings comfort, consolation and the knowledge of God’s love and faithfulness for all times, including the tough ones.

Joy was, is, and can be, our overwhelming response to the Christmas gift from God, of God.

May we receive God’s message with joyful, open hearts and share it joyfully with all those we love.

I wish you great joy this day and throughout the Christmas season which is not ending, as the world of consumer cycles would have us think, but just beginning.