

**Sunday 31st December 2023**

**The First Sunday of Christmas**

**The Revd Andy Braunston**

**Call to Worship**

Joy to the world, the Lord is come! Let every heart prepare room for Jesus and his message. **Joy to the world, the Lord is come!**

Joy to the world, the Lord is come! Let all creation rejoice in God’s presence, finding in their Source and Goal, the Light of life. **Joy to the world, the Lord is come!**

Joy to the world, the Lord is come! Let sorrow and sin be cleared as weeds before the harvest. **Joy to the world, the Lord is come!**

Joy to the world, the Lord is come! We long for our world be ruled by truth and grace so that Your righteousness may be seen O God. **Joy to the world, the Lord is come!**

This works best if followed by the hymn *Joy to the World*.

**Prayers of Approach, Confession, and Forgiveness**

In this season of love, wonder, and awe,

we come to worship You, Most High,

to rejoice in Your presence amongst us,

to sing our praises, to rest awhile,

to be led by You and to recharge our spiritual batteries.

In this season of giving, rest, and contentment,

we come to listen to You, Lord Jesus,

as you speak to us in word and song, reading and sermon,

silence and stillness and in each other,

that we may learn anew how to speak of You in our world.

In this season of joy, silliness, and companionship,

we come to be filled again by you, O Spirit,

that filled with your dynamism,

we may be better disciples in our world.

Forgive us, Eternal One,

when we don’t show the love, wonder, and awe that we should,

when we find worship tedious not joyful,

and when we turn away from Your loving energy.

Forgive us, O Christ,

when we ignore Your words to us,

turn away from our kin in the Church,

and refuse to be still in Your presence.

Forgive us, Most Holy Spirit,

when we reject Your love and presence,

preferring our own ways rather than Yours.

Forgive us, and give us time to change. Amen

Here is good news: God loves and accepts you!

Jesus gave his life for you!

The Holy Spirit wraps you in the energy to change.

So, accept the forgiveness that is yours,

find the strength to forgive others and forgive yourself. Amen.

**All Age**

Can you think of a time when you had some good news to share? Maybe news of your Christmas presents, maybe news of a new brother or sister in the family, or a new pet. How did you feel about this good news? Who did you tell? Were they excited when you told them?

Today in our service we continue to think of the good news of Christmas – the news that God came to live with us as Jesus, taking on all our human experiences. We hear of people who knew about good news and couldn’t keep silent and realise that when we have good news we shouldn’t keep silent either – especially when that news is the good news of God’s love coming to meet us.

**Prayer for Illumination**

Break open our minds, O God,

that as we listen to Your Word, read and proclaimed,

we may understand and follow anew. Amen.

**Reading**

*Isaiah 61: 10 – 62:3* |  *Galatians 4:4-7* | *St Luke 2: 22 - 40*

**Sermon Notes**

*Isaiah*

This section of Isaiah relates to prophecies of return from Exile. The people carted off from Jerusalem had settled in Babylon, planted their trees, prayed for the welfare of the city, wept over their ruined homeland, and made lives for themselves. Their children and grandchildren were raised in exile and greeted these prophecies with joy and excitement about the prospect of a return to a land they’d never really known. The return from Exile, however, was not the end of suffering. The city needed to be rebuilt, a nation needed to be re-established, ways of being faithful to God at home rather than in exile needed to be remembered. Righteousness and justice needed to be restored. God promises that the once desolate land would now flourish. Whilst the Jews returned and could flourish they were still under the patronage of King Cyrus and later invasions by Greeks and Romans meant their national life was never again what it had been. Yet people claimed the promise of God and returned home. It’s not clear if it’s the prophet or God who cries ‘for Zion’s sake I will not keep silent’ or God, but it’s a powerful statement of declaring God’s purposes and not being cowed by the events and ideologies of the age. The excitement of freedom soon gave way to the routine work of rebuilding. The excitement of Christmas soon gives way to the normal living of life – maybe it gives way as soon as we have to face the washing up on Christmas Day! Yet the joy of freedom propelled a people to re-establish themselves, the joy of Christmas can propel us to both understand and proclaim our faith.

*Galatians*

In these days after Christmas we turn from the much loved rituals of celebration to ponder why God became incarnate in Jesus. The heart of Paul’s theology in Galatians holds that just as God has redeemed the Jewish people through faith so now, in Jesus, God has redeemed Gentiles so that all have been adopted as children and heirs. The message of the incarnation is that captives are redeemed and welcomed into God’s family with wide inclusive love. Paul, of course, has the zeal of a convert and is in many ways opposed to Jewish practice. Before this passage he opines that Jewish practice is akin to slavery. After this passage he, shockingly, scolds those who seek to accommodate Christianity and Judaism. Often preachers are tempted to contrast the freedom we have in Christ with the strictures of the Jewish Law – without having any idea of Judaism as a lived faith. Jews feel no more enslaved to the law than anyone does to the Highway Code! The Laws become a way of life which give joy, identity, routine, and a way of honouring God. We should not confuse Paul’s understanding of the Law – which clearly for him hadn’t worked out well – and what a whole religion does with those laws. We can appreciate ideas of freedom without trashing another faith. After all the vast majority of us never took on the Jewish law so whatever freedom means to us it doesn’t mean the same as it did for Paul. It’s hard to read these words post Holocaust but Paul’s concern was to distinguish faith in Christ from what had gone before. What might we have been set free from? It might be ways of thinking and acting, attitudes and behaviours that demeaned ourselves or others. It might be lifestyles that were damaging – in our contemporary world I often wonder if we need to be set free from workaholism to enjoy rest and recreation. The crisis, as he saw it, of people seeking to turn Gentiles into Jews meant that Paul was uncharacteristically mean in this letter, but the crisis also produced some of his best theology. God is the loving parent who endows the children. God is the liberator setting us free from slavery. God is the gracious One who welcomes both Jew and Gentile into the family.

*St Luke*

Luke is concerned to show that Mary and Joseph obeyed all the precepts of the Law after Jesus’ birth. So on the eighth day Jesus is circumcised. He’s named following Gabriel’s instruction. The offering of turtle doves, instead of a Lamb (Leviticus 12:8) shows their poverty. Interestingly, given Paul’s views on the Jewish Law in Galatians, Mary and Joseph are very keen to obey it. Simeon’s “now your servant can depart in peace” has become part of the Night Prayer of the Church. It’s not clear if it means he can die in peace or simply go home after his vigil. His longing for God has been sated, but our yearning for God should never be satisfied – just as our yearning for a beloved is never fulfilled – time away from home increases the longing to be back. But Simeon sees a crisis in God’s presence, a crisis that will pierce Mary’s heart, a crisis that would result in the rising and falling of many. Simeon gets the order the wrong way round – she says fall and rise, where we think of the rise and fall – of the Roman Empire, of the Third Reich, of business empires, of political careers. Yet Jesus also reverses the order “unless a grain of wheat falls…and dies..” On the journey to Golgotha Mary saw Jesus fall, at the Cross she saw his blood fall to the ground. Later she saw her risen son. That sword pierced her. Yet this odd message of doom from Simeon had to be said, like Isaiah he could not be silent.

*Weaving the threads together*

Anna, Simeon, Paul and Isaiah could not keep silent and nor should we. The ancient prophet could not be silent in the face of the prospect of a return from exile – he had to shout out the good news despite all the work that needed to be done. Paul could not be silent in the face of his grasp of the good news and how he thought some were trying to pervert it. Simeon, after a lifetime of service to God, could not be silent when he finally saw God face to face, even though his speech had hard words for Mary to take in. Many contemporary Christians find speaking about their faith excruciatingly difficult. We struggle to articulate what God has done for us, why we go to Church, and the difference that faith makes. We live in an increasingly secular age where no one really minds if you have faith or not but where the claims of Christianity are increasingly unknown. What difference does faith make to you? What have you been set free from or what are you being set free from? What is it that you cannot be silent about and why not? These are the things we need to shout about – not in bullish insensitive way – we’re URC after all – but in caring, tender, yet challenging ways we need not to keep silent, but to declare what God has done for us – at Christmas and throughout the year.

**Affirmation of Faith**

What child is this who sleeps yet threatens the fall and rise of nations and empires? **This is Christ the King!**

What child is this who’s life and death will pierce his mother’s heart? Who offers light, revelation and glory? **This is Christ the King!**

What child is this born in poverty, whose parents couldn’t afford the full fee for the customary sacrifice, yet is worshiped by exotic magi? **This is Christ the King!**

What child is this who grows up to proclaim good news to the poor, liberation to the oppressed and who casts the mighty from their thrones? **This is Christ the King!**

What kind of King is this, born in a stable, attended by shepherds, forced into exile, whose birth is attended by murderous rage? **This is Jesus, the Suffering Servant, our wounded healer, our crucified God.**

works best if following the hymn *What Child is This*

**Intercessions**

Eternal One, in these days of rest and recuperation we bring our world before You. We pray today for places in bondage to war, terror and inhumanity. For those on the move for a better life, for those living in precarious shelters and for those seeking to bring aid, medical care and hope. In particular, we pray for the people of Yemen, Ukraine and Russia, Palestine and Israel.

*pause*

Prince of peace, in these days of war we pray for all who seek to make peace: those who negotiate behind the scenes, those who work for the United Nations Organisation, and the Red Cross and Crescent bringing relief and neutrality to a polarised world. We pray too for political leaders as America and the UK head towards elections; that truth may be spoken, trust our public life may be increased and wisdom granted to us as we vote.

*pause*

Holy Spirit, we pray for Your Church that we may understand our faith and be emboldened to proclaim it, that we may continue to be freed from the bondage to sin and decay that drags us down and be willing to help emancipate others, that we may be filled with Your compassion and be willing to share it.

*pause*

Holy Trinity of Love,

We remember before You all whom we love and worry about.

*longer pause*

We join all our prayers together as we pray as Jesus taught saying, Our Father…

**Offering**

Giving brings joy – to the one who receives and the one who gives. Giving is a key hallmark of our discipleship as Jesus reminds us that where our treasure is so also is our heart. We give in so many ways, of time, talent and treasure and we give of our treasure to charities, good causes and, of course to the Church. We pray that the gifts we give will imbue joy in us as well as in those who receive them. Let’s pray

God of all that is good,

we thank You for the many and varied gifts we have,

bless these gifts that we’ve given with joy,

that they make a difference in the world

and herald the coming of Your Kingdom. Amen.

**Blessing**

May the joy of the angels, the eagerness of the shepherds,

the perseverance of the wise men, the obedience of Joseph and Mary,

and the peace of the Christ-child be yours this Christmas;

and the blessing of almighty

God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,

be with you now and always, Amen.

from the Church of England’s *Common Worship*

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| Hymn Suggestions |
|  | RS | CH4 | StF | MP |
| Joy to the World |  |  |  |  |
| Good Christians All Rejoice |  |  |  |  |
| What Child Is This? |  |  |  |  |
| Unto Us A Boy Is Born |  |  |  |  |

RS – *Rejoice and Sing* | CH4 – *Church Hymnary 4* | StF – *Singing the Faith* | MP – *Mission Praise*

Another Idea

Why not finish the service with a recording of *Nunc Dimittis* (from Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy) by Geoffrey Burgon. If you don’t livestream you could play it from [here](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8vtHBGOz_Ns). (If you livestream you’ll need to get a licence.)