

Joy and Homecoming.

So we arrive at the third week of Advent, traditionally known as ‘Gaudete’ or ‘Rejoice’ Sunday, when the accent is upon joy. Christ is coming, so rejoice! We encountered joy in our delightful nativity play earlier, where we heard that when Mary came to her relative Elizabeth who was also expecting a baby, Elizabeth’s child kicked in her womb, a kind of a leap for joy. And joy is a recurring theme in Luke’s Gospel, where we find that account. We find it too in our reading from the prophet Zephaniah: ‘Sing aloud, O daughter Zion, cry out for joy; shout O Israel! Rejoice and exalt with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem!’

What is interesting, however, is that this is out of synch with rest of the book of Zephaniah which is full of doom and gloom. If you want cheering up then resist the urge to turn to Zephaniah! The opening verses of the book set the tone with a litany of judgement and destruction – and it’s pretty well all downhill after that! And that reflects the deeply depressing 7th century BC setting of the book, when already on the horizon there lies the trauma of defeat by the Babylonian Empire, the destruction of Jerusalem and captivity in Babylon. The situation looks grim – very grim. And yet, amazingly, the book climaxes with this last word, this extraordinary, joyful vision of exiles from Babylon coming home, their fortunes restored: ‘At that time I will bring you home, that time when I gather you...’ The future spells homecoming and indeed God is coming home, rejoicing with them, to dwell in their midst.

So what is joy? Where is joy? How does it come to us? And I want to take as our guide this morning the writer C S Lewis who wrote beautifully and profoundly about joy for it was one of the themes of his life. And the first thing to be said is that for Lewis joy is associated with longing. Joy is associated with longing for something that deep down we are cut off from and estranged from and that we yearn for. Typical of Lewis with his public school background, he gave the example of the longing for the end of term, the yearning for that day when finally school was over and he went home. And having been to a boarding school myself I can relate to that. The strange thing was that joy did not just come with actually getting home. As the end of term approached, the anticipation of homecoming brought joy, as if it was borrowing from what was to come. I remember vividly the last days of term being suffused with what can

only be described as joy - a longing, a yearning for something just out of reach that was itself immensely pleasurable.

And this image of homesickness and homecoming is what makes today's reading from Zephaniah so appropriate, where the themes of homecoming and joy are so intertwined. Here God is giving the Jews a priceless gift. God is giving them a promise, a promise of return, return from exile, return from captivity, return from alienation. Here God is giving them the promise of a return home, return to identity, return to their true selves. And they carried that promise in their hearts and it could always surprise them with joy, even in their very darkest days.

And of course for Lewis, as for us, this image of homecoming and its associated joy is a metaphor for human life. He referred to 'our lifelong nostalgia, our longing to be reunited with something in the universe from which we now feel cut off, to be on the inside of some door which we have always seen from the outside . . .' And we sense joy therefore in those moments of reunion and reconnection. We sense it in those moments when we feel reconnected to God, reunited with our true selves, reconnected to God's intention for life and God's purposes for the world. In those moments we anticipate a far greater homecoming that awaits us. Then comes joy.

In closing let us return to one beautiful image in the Zephaniah passage. In this joyful scene of homecoming with God, let's return to verse 17: 'The Lord your God is in your midst... He will rejoice over you... He will exalt over you with loud singing as on a day of festival.' Here it is not only the people of Jerusalem who are rejoicing but God, in their midst. Here is a joyful God, partying with God's people. I mentioned earlier the theme of joy in Luke's Gospel and we're reminded of that little cluster of stories in Luke 15 which resound with joy: a shepherd who rejoices over finding the lost sheep, a woman rejoicing over finding a lost coin, a father rejoicing over the homecoming of his lost, prodigal son. Watch that father running down the road, stumbling, arms open wide in joyful welcome. And see him partying until the early hours at the great feast of celebration for the son who has come home. Well, behold your God!

This is the Advent God who is coming to be with us. This is the source of all joy - our eternal home who comes to us again and again and again. Amen.

O holy God, gracious God, eternal God,
we come before you this morning singing
for we rejoice in you,
and in your love,
and in you grace and goodness to us.
We come before you with hearts lifted,
and with spirits roused
to give you praise and worship.
For you have created us in joy,
that you might find delight in us and in your world;
The universe echoes with your laughter
for your pleasure in what you have made know no bounds.
And in Jesus Christ your joy has overflowed,
pouring yourself out and being found in our midst,
causing the lame to leap and the weary to dance
and bringing smiles to the faces of the downcast.
O God may our worship reflect the joy you find in us
and so bless your heart.
O God forgive us for our sins.
Forgive us for all that grieves you and brings you sorrow.
Forgive us that we contribute to the tears and sighs
of a world too familiar with pain and sadness.
We confess our wrongdoing and look to you for grace.

O God,
who in Jesus Christ endured the cross,
disregarding the shame
for the joy that was set before him,
bring to us forgiveness and make us new
that our lives may resound and rejoice to your glory.
We pray in Jesus' name and in his words we pray together saying...