

Luke 1:39-45

15.12.19

*A leap for joy*

A baby in the womb leaps for joy – that’s what we find in our reading this morning from Luke’s Gospel, and it’s a great image for this third Sunday in Advent, designated in some parts of the Christian church as ‘Gaudete’ – or ‘Joy’ Sunday. Mary, pregnant with Jesus, visits Elizabeth, pregnant with the baby who will become John the Baptist – and John, in his mother’s womb, leaps for joy. Women here who have given birth will know what that feels like: their baby kicking and moving in their womb, and we wonder how an unborn baby is affected by what goes on around them: how the outside world impacts on their life within their mother. What do they hear? What do they sense?

Well, the unborn John clearly sensed instinctively the unborn Jesus. He gave this joyful leap, and this is in keeping with the rest of Luke’s Gospel for joy is a theme that runs right through it, in the story of Jesus’ birth and in his teaching and ministry. Indeed Luke’s gospel is sometimes called the gospel of joy. And that leads us to ask the question, what do we mean by joy? What is it? Apparently it is something that should be evidenced in Christians but does that mean that we should always be happy and upbeat and smiling?

Well, in this short time this morning I would like to suggest to you that joy has something to do with being connected, or reconnected, and let me explain what I mean. Take the baby John: there is already a connection between him and Jesus for we are told that Elizabeth, his mother is a relative of Mary’s. So there is a blood link there. But when Mary greets Elizabeth John seems to sense a greater connection, a link to God, a link to the one who God has sent and who he will later serve by preparing the way for him. And in that moment of connectedness with the divine John leaps for joy.

Or again, think for a moment about sin. What is sin? Well, sin has to do with separation, with estrangement, with disconnection. ‘All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God’ writes Paul in his letter to the Romans and there sin is a matter of being disconnected from our true goal, from our true humanity, from our true purpose. Sin estranges us from God, but it also separates us from one another, and from creation and nature: we become disconnected and estranged and so the world is a conflicted place. If sin separates, however, grace unites and reconciles and reconnects. And whenever that happens there is joy. So Jesus says, ‘there is much joy in heaven when a sinner repents’, for when a sinner repents there is reconciliation and sin’s separation is overcome. Forgiveness means reconnection - and thence comes joy.

So Jesus’ ministry is punctuated with joy. Outcasts and outlaws who have been excluded from society are welcomed in, reconnected; sinners are forgiven and embraced by God; the sick and the heavy laden are reconnected with life, the dehumanised are reconnected with their true identity and their humanity. And Luke’s Gospel is full of meals: someone has said that in most of Luke’s Gospel Jesus is either at a meal, going to one or leaving one. No wonder he was known as a glutton. But meals are points of connection and communication - at least when we are not on our mobile phones or computer games. And so with all this connection and reconnection Luke’s Gospel resounds with joy!

The great Christian author C S Lewis wrote powerfully about joy – it was one of the themes of his life. Lewis referred to, and I quote, ‘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 cherish those moments of reunion and reconnection - with God, with our true selves, with God’s intention for life and God’s purposes for the world. Estrangement and isolation are overcome – and then comes joy.

You could say, of course, that Christmas is all about connection. It is about God coming into the world, forging a bond with the world that sin and death will do their best to break but which will prevail. That’s what the baby John in the womb sensed and why he leaped for joy. And later, as he baptises Jesus in the Jordan river, the heavens will open and the Spirit of God will descend, further linking heaven and earth.

All this, however, cashes out in our lives. We all have experiences of disconnection: times when God feels absent and distant; times when relationships break down and there is hurt and anger and betrayal; times when we feel isolated and alienated from the world around; times when we feel estranged from our true selves, from the person we would like to be and that we think we truly are. Christmas is a season of binding heaven and earth, God and us. It's a season of grace, which reconnects and reunites sins separations. God grants us, we pray, those graceful moments when even in darkness and confusion our hearts leap – just like that little unborn baby resting in Elizabeth's womb. Amen.