

Sunday Morning Resources

Sunday 22 December 2024 - The Fourth Sunday of Advent

Lectionary Readings (depending on the kind of service you are leading, you may use one or more of the following readings – however, you **must** use the gospel reading, as this is what the homily is based on)

Micah 5. 2-5a; Canticle Magnificat (or Psalm 80. 1-8); Hebrews 10. 5-10; Luke 1. 39-45 [46-55]

Homily

Today's homily has been written by the Revd Jane Rees, Priest - Associate Vicar, March (Benefice)

The great hymn by Isaac Watts opens with the well-known lines.

“Joy to the world! The Lord is come. Let earth receive her King...”

in a few days' time we will celebrate with Joy the birth of the baby Jesus.

The Christmas story is all about Joy.

But I wonder what we think about when we talk of having Joy?

What does Joy mean to you this week in your life right where you are?

And how do we find Joy this Christmas season when there is so much in our world and our circumstances that can diminish our Joy?

Our gospel reading this morning shows us that Joy can be evident wherever the presence of Jesus is. For joy is one of the great signs of the presence of the Holy Spirit. Through Mary's obedience and service and through Elizabeth's hospitality - God's spirit was manifest and the two women were full of joy.

Here in Luke's gospel, we hear that Mary now pregnant herself goes to visit her elderly relative, Elizabeth.

Mary has been told by the angel Gabriel that Elizabeth has conceived and is six months pregnant.

Mary, a teenager, was unmarried, and faced tremendous social stigma in her neighbourhood as the gossip swirled around her. Elizabeth was dangerously past childbearing years, and her husband had lost the power of speech since his own encounter with the angel Gabriel six months previously. There were many reasons for both women to be anxious, stressed, worried, doubtful, and full of fear for the future. But we see that it was not so...

Traditionally Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah are thought to have lived in a town called Ain Karim about five miles south of Jerusalem. This would be a journey from Nazareth of about 70 miles, between four or five days travel on foot.

Luke writes that following her encounter with the angel Gabriel Mary set out and went with haste. The Greek here conveys a sense of eagerness and enthusiasm. Mary responds to God's call with active service - putting her own needs and concerns to one side to be with her elderly relative to offer support and consolation until the baby John was born.

Mary's willingness to follow where God was leading and respond as God directed brought his blessing into her life. When we obey God's promptings, however inconvenient they might be, we will find there the presence of Joy.

When Mary and Elizabeth meet, the unborn John leaps for joy in Elizabeth's womb.

Elizabeth is filled with God's spirit and prophecies four statements:

That Mary is blessed among women.

That the child is blessed within her.

That Mary is the mother of her Lord.

And that Mary is blessed because she believed what the Lord has spoken to her.

We notice that while Elizabeth is aware of Mary's presence - it is the unborn John who is aware of the presence of the Lord Jesus, and he leaps for joy.

Earlier in this chapter of Luke's gospel the angel Gabriel appears to John's father Zechariah in the temple at Jerusalem and tells him that his son would be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born.

As Gabriel's word is fulfilled, John receives the Holy Spirit in the presence of Jesus as Mary arrives at the house of Elizabeth and he leaps for joy.

After Jesus has been conceived, then by God's power the Holy Spirit can become active in others. And so, as her son John is filled with the Holy Spirit then Elizabeth herself is filled with God's spirit, and she begins to prophecy....

While the gospel story today shows how Mary responds with obedience and service, we see that in turn Elizabeth responds with warmth and hospitality - and as she welcomes Mary as her, Elizabeth also welcomes Jesus into her home too.

It is likely that Mary herself at this incredible time in her life had few people that she could talk to - it is probably that she went to Elizabeth as a trusted mentor - someone who would understand and would believe that what she had herself experienced was true.

Mary's reasoning proves justified - Elizabeth welcomes Mary without questioning or judgement. Elizabeth praises, blesses, affirms, and encourages the young woman who arrives at her home.

For three months or so these two women lived day by day and side by side - an unusual combination - one seemingly too old to have a child and one seemingly not quite ready to have a child.

And yet the visit made, and hospitality given proved of sustenance and benefit to both women. The youth of Mary would have energised Elizabeth - how she would have valued the teenagers' conversation while for those months her husband Zechariah had lost his power of speech altogether.

And in turn Mary would have become wiser and stronger in her faith because of her time with Elizabeth. When she returned home, she may well have found the courage to face accusations and condemnation from the local community.

Elizabeth is in many ways a minor character in the life of Jesus; but her wisdom and grace would have shaped the life of his mother Mary's faith greatly.

Luke's gospel account this morning of the visitation is a much beloved part of our Christmas story - it is also a story that can shape our own spiritual lives as we can ponder from it that where we welcome each other we welcome Christ himself into our homes and into our relationships.

So, this Christmas season may we find joy in echoing both the obedient service of Mary and the hospitality of Elizabeth -

supporting those who might be in a time of unplanned need,
receiving those who unexpectedly cross our path and,
encouraging those who might be young in years or perhaps young in faith.

For as we serve and obey God is very near and the joy of his eternal presence is shared among us - not just at this Christmas time but all through the year.

Amen.

Ways to Engage all Generations

When different generations are gathered together in worship there is an opportunity to build relationships and to encounter God in our conversations as we build relationships and learn from each other no matter what our ages, stage of life or faith and for all present to feel included. Adding some wondering questions to the service at an appropriate moment can help to do this.

Wondering Questions: Some wondering questions that may help to engage all generations to ponder and explore during the talk, service or during the week may include (three or so) of the following style of questions:

I wonder how you would respond if a relative arrived at your home unexpectedly this Christmas?

I wonder how you would support a young teenager who came to you when she found herself pregnant?

I wonder if there is any elderly person that you can offer to visit over the 12 days of Christmas?

I wonder how you can show hospitality in new ways this Christmas?

I wonder who in your community can you bring the Joy of God's spirit to through acts of service this Christmas?

I wonder how God is gently prompting you to respond to Him this Christmas?

Suggested intercessions

We pray for the Church: that the message of Joy that Advent brings will be proclaimed to every part of our communities. We give thanks for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ into our world and pray that his Holy Spirit will visit each of our churches and homes this Christmas.

[in our own parish/ benefice we pray especially this week for]

Lord in your mercy

Hear our prayer

We pray for our world and for all leaders and governments: that they will respond with compassion and justice to the needs of the people, especially regarding the elderly and all those with young children.

[in our own community we pray especially this week for the needs of]

Lord in your mercy

Hear our prayer

We pray today both for all expectant mothers - and for those who have been trying to conceive for many years. We pray for those who feel overwhelmed by their pregnancy. May they receive support and love as they plan to welcome their child into the world.

[in our own parish / community we pray especially this week for the needs of ...]

Lord in your mercy

Hear our prayer

We pray for all those like Elizabeth's husband Zechariah who have difficulties communicating; we pray for all who are born without speech, for those who are elective mutes, for all who have lost the power of speech due to a stroke or neurological illness. We pray that in the challenge of the busyness of Christmas social gatherings they would be upheld, and their loved ones embraced with patience and support.

Lord in your mercy

Hear our prayer

[in our own parish / community we remember this week especially....]

We pray for all who are unwell, for those in hospital at this time and for all who are housebound this Christmas.... may they know the joy of God's presence through the love of those around them. We remember with thanksgiving all who are carers over the festive season.

[in our own parish / community we remember this week especially....]

Lord in your mercy

Hear our prayer

We pray for ourselves - as the last minute preparations for Christmas continue this week that we will be mindful of the quiet needs of those around us and be ready to offer and receive hospitality in new ways.

Lord in your mercy

Hear our prayer

We remember all those who have died in the faith of Christ, that as they shared our Christmas joy on earth, they may come to enjoy eternal glory in God's kingdom.

[we remember this week on the anniversary of their death.....]

Lord in your mercy

Hear our prayer

Merciful father, accept these prayers for the sake of your beloved Son our saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Suggested hymns/songs

Hail to the Lord's anointed

Christ is the world's true light

The God whom earth and sea and sky

I come with joy to meet my Lord

Come thou Long expected Jesus

Tell out my Soul

Joy to the world

From heaven you came (the servant king)

Activities to accompany the service:

If you are looking for resources to accompany the service for engaging younger children, then there are lots of online resources. The following free to access/download resources may be useful starting points:

- <https://flamecreativekids.blogspot.com/>
- <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/MessyChurchBRF/>
- <https://www.faithinkids.org/>
- [reflectionary.org](https://www.reflectionary.org/) – lectionary-based resources
- [engageworship](https://www.engageworship.com/) – in particular 'Area 52' for lectionary-based material
- <https://www.bdeducation.org.uk/product-category/primary-age-5-11/>
(weekly@ lectionary resource)