

**Talk for Blue Christmas service,
All Saints' Cottenham with Rampton: Joy to the world
13 December 2020, Alison Wedgbury
Readings: Luke 2:1-7, John 1:1-5, Luke 2:25-32
Carols:
Away in a manger, Joy to the world, Silent night, O little town of Bethlehem**

Perhaps you've chosen to come to this service because 2020 has been a difficult year for you. Perhaps all the adverts persuading you to have a happy, jolly Christmas, surrounded by family, fill you with sadness rather than joy. Perhaps this is especially so this year. Perhaps it's something you feel every December. Perhaps you lost someone dear to you recently or some time ago. It is normal in life to experience grief, fears, sadness, disappointments and confusion. In addition, many people this year have had to grieve in isolation, feeling more alone than in other years. As a church, we can't give quick answers to all problems. But we hope that the readings, prayers and music in this service will go some way to offering comfort and peace.

Let me tell you a recent true story about comfort and peace. It's a story about learning to see the world differently, to see joy where it seemed to be absent before. The Saturday morning Radio 4 programme, 'Open Country' on 5th December, was about the wild open spaces of Redesdale in Northumberland and about how the community was restoring and celebrating the environment. The programme included musicians and singers (as we do too today). It also featured a group of former soldiers, ex-marines, both men and women, who'd suffered from injury, stress and trauma in active service. Years ago, as young recruits, they had come to Redesdale for initial training on the moor and marshland. At that time for them the landscape was scary and dangerous. They crawled through water and thorns, learned to survive at night in the open and experienced the shock of gunfire. Of course, that was all about toughening them up, getting them ready to fight in hostile contexts. After having seen friends die, having lost their own physical or mental health, having lost their confidence, they had come back to Redesdale. This time it was to help with an archaeology project. Even though none of them had done archaeology before, they were surprised to be told they brought invaluable skills with them. They were valued because their Army training focused on attention to detail, careful observation of their environment and teamwork. All that is equally essential in military life and archaeology. Back in Redesdale again after some years, having suffered in so many ways, they started to see the landscape in a completely new way. It was no longer terrifying but wonderful, full of history and discovery. They found a new way forward in life. They talked about finding joy in the careful excavation of prehistoric and mediaeval contexts. They found joy in the company of others and sharing old and new experiences.

So, for the moment, forget the unreal stories of Christmas, the ones in slick commercial adverts. The real Christmas story, the story about the birth of Jesus some two thousand years ago, is one worth revisiting. 'Joy' features a lot: the joy of Mary and Joseph, the joy of the shepherds, the joy of the angels, the joy of Simeon and also Anna in the temple. Like the ex-marines in Northumberland, let's look at the story with new eyes. Like archaeology, Bible readings can be about understanding what you find but also what you do not find. Both are important.

You may have heard the Bible story and today's carols all your life or it may all be fairly new to you. Now let's look at Augustus, Jesus and the shepherds with new understanding. In Luke's Gospel, we hear first about the baby Jesus being born in Bethlehem. Why does Luke's story begin by mentioning the Emperor Augustus? It's not just to fix a date. We are invited to compare the way Jesus was born with what people knew about Augustus. The Roman Emperor Augustus was famous for proclaiming himself to be the son of a god, the saviour of the Roman world, bringing peace and justice. He required people to worship him as god. By contrast, Jesus was not born in a palace. Mary and Joseph laid this newborn baby in a feeding trough for animals, a manger. It was warm and safe but certainly not luxurious.

Later in this service the choir will sing 'Silent Night'. In that carol, shepherds hear the 'heavenly hosts sing Alleluia, Christ the Saviour is born!' Christians understand from this story that this Jesus, a small, vulnerable baby, would be the real Saviour of the world, not the Emperor Augustus. In Luke's Gospel story it's also important that it is shepherds who hear the news first. Shepherds are a reminder of David in the Old Testament who became king but started life as a shepherd boy. And Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the 'city of David' because Joseph was 'descended from the house and family of David', that is, King David.

The second passage from Luke's Gospel reminds us what happens when the kingdom of the world, of human rulers like the Emperor Augustus, is replaced by the kingdom of God. Jesus is still a young baby, but Simeon recognises the future and praises God: 'my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel'. In other words, a light for everyone on earth. At the end of this service the choir will sing the carol 'O little town of Bethlehem'. Notice in the words of that carol that Jesus is called the 'Christ' the same word as 'Messiah' and 'Our Lord Emmanuel' which means 'God with us'. It's all part of a story much bigger than simply the birth of a baby.

The other Bible passage today, the one from the Gospel of John, is at first sight less like a story. But it too is a reminder of the Old Testament, of new beginnings, a new Creation, as in Genesis. This baby Jesus is life itself and light itself, coming into our world. The focus on 'the Word' meant something to ancient philosophers. 'Word' or 'Logos' was the meaning of life itself.

As the great 21st century writer Tom Wright says, we know that words today have life. As soon as they are out of someone's mouth, words change situations. Sometimes that's a wonderful change. It's pretty certain that when you or I said our first word as a baby, the person looking after us thought that was rather wonderful! Sometimes of course words are devastating. Perhaps some of us have heard the dreaded words at a hospital appointment: "The consultant would like to talk to you".

However, what John's Gospel tells us is that, whatever happens, we can hold on to Jesus, the light: 'The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it'.

Finally, let's look at the word 'joy' that was repeated in the carol that the choir have just sung. You may not be feeling particularly joyous this year, but joy means more than being simply happy. Jesus was born into the real world, not some fantasy place where nothing ever went wrong and nobody suffered.

There's a famous quote by an American psychologist, William Schutz: "Joy comes from using your potential". Jesus, the one who brought 'Joy to the world', was someone who really did use his potential. As the church year continues after Christmas, we will hear the

unfolding story of the rest of Jesus' life. We will hear a little bit about his childhood but mostly about his adult life in which both joy and suffering played a part. But for today, the accounts of his birth make a wonderful story of discovery and joy. Mother Teresa, a recent saint who worked for years caring for suffering people in very difficult contexts, talked about joy: "Joy is infectious; therefore be full of joy!"

Like the ex-marines in Northumberland, maybe this Christmas we can all hear and see the world around us in a new way. Once they feared the familiar landscape and saw danger round every rock and in every pool of water. It made them feel weak and vulnerable. Afterwards, they saw exactly the same landscape around them, still full of marsh and rocks but now full of discovery and potential. They found joy in a place they thought they knew well but were only just starting to enjoy. It made them feel stronger, better able to live. They still had to deal with injuries and sadness but they had gained new ways of seeing.

Some things had not changed, but everything had changed. That's essentially the truth at the heart of the real story of Christmas. That tiny word 'joy' is immensely important in the Christmas story. Finding joy does not mean we can forget to grieve or that the past disappears. But we can recognise God's healing love coming into our world with warmth and wonder in the person of Jesus. We hope that this service does give you some real joy to help with the difficult times.