**The Source of our joy December 12 2021.**

M.Scott Peck begins his well known book “The Road Less Travelled with the sentence, *“Life is difficult!”* Indeed this is reality. Life itself is full of challenges for all of us.

For the people of Israel in Zephaniah’s day, many of the challenges before them were the consequences of their own poor choices. They had turned their backs on God and had developed behaviours that were oppressive, arrogant and corrupt.

Likewise the message of John the Baptist challenged the people of his day to change their behaviours and to return to God. The people were open to changing and therefore asked John, *“What then should we do?”[[1]](#footnote-1)* John gave some highly practical and individualised instructions to various groups of people in his audience. Our faith in God is always meant to be highly practical and to be seen in the way we choose to live. To periodically and intentionally consider “What then should we do” in the light of what we understand of God and God’s ways is a wise investment of our time.

Life can be difficult because of choices we make and the consequences which we live with. Life can also be difficult due to factors outside our control.

Paul’s letter to the Philippians, (which were heard at the beginning of our Service), is a letter to a community experiencing significant persecution. It features many words of encouragement to this community to rejoice, even in the midst of the sufferings which were part of their everyday life. Life was difficult for this community, but there was nothing that they could do to change their circumstances, they needed a way to live in the midst of their difficulties.

We likewise often face circumstances beyond our control, painful and distressing situations, and we are abundantly aware of the reality that life is difficult.

In the passage we read today, the people of Zephaniah’s community were being encouraged to rejoice in the confidence that God had not abandoned them and was in fact renewing their community. They were reminded that even when their hands may appear to be weakening, when they feel a loss of heart, a weakened resolve in the midst of a desperate situation, even there they can be encouraged by the reality that God will strengthen them. God was active in their midst, God would remain faithful to them, despite their failings. Therefore, they were being called to rejoice, to celebrate the reality that God was present, God was merciful, powerful, active and caring towards them.

They were also being reminded that God took joy in them, that their relationship with God was a two way relationship, a relationship which brought joy to them and to God. These people shared in a joy that was far stronger and more consistent than mere happiness.

Helmut Thielecke, the German theologian and pastor, held onto a powerful hope in God and shared this with those who were particularly suffering under the oppressive Nazi regime. He highlighted that prayer, suffering, joy and the surprises of God work together in our lives. He stressed that joyful uncertainty and expectation characterise our journey with God. We often relate uncertainty to anxiety, but he encouraged people to see that uncertainty and the life of faith, can indeed produce joy, as we focus our confidence in God. Joy is often related to hardship. Times of hardship often focus our attention on God, strengthen our dependence on God, and deepen our relationship with God. This relationship is the source of our joy.

As we journey through Advent, we recognise that Mary and Joseph were caught up in a drama of joyful uncertainty and expectation. In the midst of their wonderings and fears it was their awareness of God’s presence with them that strengthened them and sustained them. God’s presence brought them joy, even in their uncertainties.

The Christians in Philippi, in the midst of their sufferings, were encouraged to be joyful in their relationship with God. Rejoicing in God, prayer and thanksgiving were at the heart of Jewish piety. This letter is often referred to as the letter of joy. Joy is mentioned here more frequently than in any other book in the Bible. The Philippians faced many uncertainties, so Paul prays that they may be strengthened within. He speaks of how he rejoices in the ways in which their faith in God is apparent to all, and encourages them to rejoice in the midst of everything they face in life because God is always with them. This joy is not just a feeling it’s an expression of faith in God, a confidence that we are not abandoned. It is not merely an internal emotion it is a commitment to celebrate the presence of God with us. This joy relates to recognising “the presence and movement of God in specific circumstances”, it highlights “appropriate ways of thinking, feeling and acting in the world”.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Henri Nouwen has said, “Joy does not simply happen to us. We have to choose joy and keep choosing it every day. It is a choice based on knowledge that we belong to God and have found in God our refuge and our safety and that nothing, not even death, can take God away from us. Joy is the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing – sickness, failure, emotional distress, oppression, war, or even death – can take that love away.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

The past two years have exposed each of us to unprecedented levels of isolation and consequent suffering. We have found ourselves in circumstances beyond our control. These circumstances have drained us all at various points in time. We have grieved over the loss of loved ones during this period. We have grieved for the loss of life worldwide and for the enormous load on our frontline workers. Life has been difficult at various points.

These times have prompted many to prayer. In the midst of times of helplessness, we often draw closer to God, and we can in hindsight see that our relationship with God has been strengthened.

We have rejoiced in the advances of medical science, the ability to develop vaccines and appropriate treatments for COVID, the selfless dedication of so many frontline workers and the kindness of neighbours and even strangers. As we have seen the hand of God at work it causes us to rejoice.

In recent weeks we have rejoiced in reunions with friends and family, in restored levels of freedom and have had a renewed appreciation of those things which we have been missing.

As we approach this Christmas Season we recognise that many of our community will be facing this Christmas without someone whom they have loved dearly. Let’s make sure that we are being prayerfully supportive of each other and the unique circumstance that we all may be facing. The apostle John in recording Jesus farewell discourse with the disciples refers to Jesus saying *“So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.”[[4]](#footnote-4)*

The challenge of the days we have lived through have left deep scars for some people particularly. The concept of joy may be hard for them to engage with. Yet God’s joy is not a frivolous happiness, but a deep seated awareness that God is with us. In this Christmas Season we often reflect on Jesus being called Emmanuel – God with us. The ongoing presence of God with us, reminds us that our faith affirms a life beyond that which we currently experience and comprehend. This is another aspect of the joy we experience in our relationship with God.

This season also reminds us that we share a two way relationship with God, and though somewhat incomprehensible, that we can also bring joy to God. What a good time to be still, to take time to engage with God, that our relationship with God may grow.

1. Luke 3: 10 NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Stephen E. Fowl, *Philippians,* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 2005) 182 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Henri Nouwen, in Tony Casle Ed. *Complete Quotes and Anecdotes,* (Suffolk, U.K.: Kevin Mayhew Press, 2017) 217 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. John 16:22 NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-4)