

SERMON: NOVEMBER 29 2020

ADVENT 1 : *Welcome to the Season of Joyous Celebration*



JEREMIAH 33:14-16 – PSALM 100

Welcome to the season of Advent.

Here in Australia . Advent comes as the school year ends and our long summer holiday time is about to start – it’s our time for reflection about the year just going and our hopes for the year to come.

Advent leading into Christmas is also filled with plans for connecting with family and friends and a break from routine - It brings our most precious relationships into focus and our need for renewal and re-creation.

Our theme here in Blacktown Uniting Church for Advent and Christmas this year is **Joy in the Midst**. Today I invite you into a season of joyous celebration.

One of the desert fathers in the early centuries after Christ said “Joy is the echo of God’s life in us” **“Joy is the echo of God’s life in us”**

This Advent I have been drawn to a series of reflections based upon this book *The Echo of God* by David Adam an Anglican priest who has lived and worked in North Yorkshire and Northumberland and is best known for his prayers in the Celtic tradition. And this Advent my prayer is that “the glad tiding of great joy” of Christ’s coming will fill and reverberate and echo in our lives in a fresh and life-giving way.

We need some joy and some hope - don’t we? This has been a year like no other. You do not need me to remind you about how our lives have been disrupted and changed . Many folk have said to me that they will just be glad when this year is over –

(2)

We know that even where COVID-19 has been suppressed that we cannot relax - And some of the familiar traditions we all love will not be happening this year.

Some of us look back over this year and grieve family and friends who have died - some in aged care homes where we could not visit them and we miss them terribly.

As this year comes to an end, we remember bushfires of an intensity and ferocity we had not seen before - many people grieve the loss of lives and homes and communities and livelihood and the bush with billions of its creatures.

When the pandemic arrived, waves of infections and lockdowns and closed borders and businesses have changed the way we live and relate. It was so good to see state borders opening up again this week.

It's altered our routines and plans and tested our patience and ingenuity and resilience. Some of us have suffered loss of job and income and many of us have experienced increased mental stress and pressure in our relationships. This past week we marked Violence against Women Day and the reports have been tragic.

To this strange year we add the continuing story of the Black Lives Matter movement, the USA Presidential elections and questioning of truth and facts and science. Conspiracy theories have abounded - while China flexes its muscle in our region and right now people from Tigray province in Ethiopia are fleeing into Sudan and there is continuing war and famine in places like Yemen.... you can add to the list. We need some good news and some joy. There is a deep human longing abroad for hope and peace and healing and stability and steady leadership.

IN our reading earlier, Jeremiah was addressing his people at a time when they were feeling hopeless and helpless. During his lifetime Jeremiah sees the destruction of Jerusalem, his people taken into exile and the end of the kingdom of Judah.

He's a prophet usually associated with warnings and judgment and pessimism and yet today's reading is filled with comfort and hope. Why? Because he has a message of a time when God will come to fulfil his promises of restoration and new life for his people.

And if we open the Bible and begin with the joy and delight of God in creating or open the Gospels which begin with tidings of great joy of the coming of Jesus Christ our Saviour - if we read the end of the Gospels with wondering and joyous stories of Jesus' resurrection and if we read the end of our Bibles with the beautiful vision of the tree of life and Christ in his glory and words "Amen Come Lord Jesus", we catch something to lift our spirits with joy.

(3)

Surrounding and underpinning everything that we give thanks for and everything that may be weighing us down or troubling us is the promise that God comes to us and is with us. The meaning of Emmanuel one of the titles for Jesus means “God with us”. And the echo of that presence in our lives is joy.



Today we are invited to be enfolded with the gift of joy which is found in the presence of God. That is why as we come to worship today at the beginning of this church year, we do it with thanksgiving. Many of the psalms in the worship book of the ancient Jews are full of joy. **Psalm 100** invites us to experience this joy in the world and in the service of God.

Make a joyful noise to the Lord all the earth- Rejoice! for you are in God and God is in you – Rejoice! We live in the heart –the very centre - of the being of God. And this invitation is for all the earth. This was a courageous line for the ancient Jews to sing because it reaches out to include their enemies and all peoples from all lands – indeed the whole creation. It says God’s love and care is not restricted. All of the earth is invited to rejoice in God.

Come into his presence with singing - in other words **enjoy** being with God. There’s a delightful story of St John Vianney. He was a French parish priest who in the Catholic Church is venerated as the patron saint of priests. One day he was asked by a member of his parish why he was so long in prayer and his reply was: “I look at God and God looks at me”. “I look at God and God looks at me”. Prayer is not just the words we say – it is intimate - it is being in the very presence of God.



(4)

And when we live in the presence of God even our work is a joyful prayer.

Know that the Lord is God

The Psalmist sees how there are many things we put our trust in - health plans, security, money, success, hard work, powerful people – but only God provides a firm foundation. It is God whose loving presence keeps and sustains and holds everything together – God is not about the past or about heaven by and by - God **is** here now.

For We are his..... We belong to God. I cannot help but remind you of Julian of Norwich of whom I spoke a few weeks back. Julian the mediaeval mystic wondered about the hazelnut –



How could such a small thing survive? - and the answer she was given? “It lasts and ever shall because God loves it” and Julian realized three truths “The first is that God made it –the second is that God loves it and the third is that God looks after it.” Julian rejoiced that God is our maker, our lover and our keeper.

So enter his gates with thanksgiving

Count all God's blessings! Next week we will celebrate Holy Communion and what the Child born at Christmas does for us - in fact another name for Holy Communion is Eucharist which means thanksgiving.



(5)

For the Lord is Good – his steadfast love endures forever and his faithfulness to all generations” -

God has been faithful to us down through the ages. It is only underlined in the new covenant God made through the life and the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The green circle of the Advent wreath reminds us that God’s love and the life God offers has no end.

Friends God is good. God gives us life - God loves us and God comes among us in Jesus born at Christmas.... We can trust God.

And so I invite you to enter this season of Advent joyfully because whatever you have experienced this past year, you do not deal with them alone. We deal with them enfolded in the knowledge that God loves us and comes to us. The Christ who comes fulfils all the longings of our heart and holds everything together.

Today I invite you to enter afresh into God’s loving presence. It’s an advent invitation for us to accept and an invitation we are called to share with others.

And the echo of the presence of God’s life in us is joy.

Let us pray:

Come, true light. Come life eternal..

Come for your name fills our hearts with longing and is ever on our lips.....

Come, for you are yourself the desire that is within me.

Come, my breath and my life.

Come, the consolation of my humble soul.

Come, my joy, my glory, my endless delight. Amen. (Symeon the New Theologian (949-1022))

Rev Laurel Barr – 26th November, 2020