

Joy for All People

*A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney
on Christmas Day 2010, by David Gill*

“I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day ... a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord” (St Luke 2:10-11)

“Good news of great joy”. That was what Christmas meant to the men and women of the biblical story, long centuries ago.

Joy, though the baby was so small, so weak, so insignificant. Joy, though most of those involved had no money, no comfort, no security. Joy, though powerful people in the land were set against them. Joy, though the rest of the world neither knew nor cared about just one more child.

Why, then, the great joy? Why?

Because here, they believed, was the Saviour, the Messiah, the Lord. Here was the God they yearned for, the God they had awaited for so long. Here was the Mystery of the ages, broken open before their eyes. Here was life's meaning, become flesh, in a person, full of grace and truth.

Think about that word “joy”.

It does not mean a shallow cheerfulness, something we stir up for ourselves. Not false frivolity, that dies as soon as the party is over. Not a state of mind that can be switched on or off at will.

Years back, when I was playing at being a soldier, the officer then commanding Sydney University Regiment decided that a regimental ball would be good for everyone's morale. The ball, having been decreed, was duly organized. Just before

it began the CO called us together. “Gentlemen,” he said – for in those days we all were. “I want this evening to be a success. You will enjoy yourselves!”

Joy of course doesn’t work that way. There are some things even colonels cannot command. You can’t plan it, or will it, or order it up like pizza when you want some. Joy is always a gift, something that comes from beyond ourselves.

Deep, dark, enduring joy remains, through good times and bad. It is something that outlasts all of life’s dramas. Something that doesn’t ask us to play games, to pretend to certainties we don’t possess, to play at being jolly when we’re not. Something that’s authentic and enduring because it is grounded in the truth, in the way things really are.

But take care. The joy of Christmas stems not primarily from syrupy heart-warming stories of Jesus’ birth. As the great Swiss theologian Karl Barth used to warn: unless you have gazed on the cross of Calvary, you cannot begin to understand the babe of Bethlehem.

This child is born for us, yes. This child will live for us, yes. But this child will know despair for us. This child will suffer and die for us. This child will rise for us in glory.

In Christ, the self-giving love of God is for us. Now. Today. Through all our days. Even – perhaps especially – through the darkest of our nights.

God cares. God loves. God understands. God forgives. God heals. God makes life new. And all for us, though we may not know it or even care about it, though we never deserve it, though we at best barely comprehend it.

John Donne, four centuries ago, chose his words carefully: “Whom God loves, he loves to the end; and not to their end, and their death, but to his end, and his end is that he might love them more”.

God -- for us. For each and every one of us, with no exceptions. Which, my friend, includes you. Today, the great joy of Christmas is a gift that bears your name.

But a gift must be opened. To find out what is inside, you have to remove the ribbons, take off the paper, tear open the package. Lots of people are doing that today, with gifts that were bought in the shops.

If you received a Christmas gift of great value, of great beauty, something that would transform your life – and if you didn't even bother to open the package, if you just stuck it in the corner and ignored it – then, let's face it, you would be a bit stupid.

That is the mistake so many people make with God's great Christmas gift. They don't investigate it, to find out what it means. They leave the ribbons on, the paper undisturbed, the package unopened.

And the great treasure of the gospel remains hidden from their eyes. Oh they may think they know what Christianity is all about. But too often they have no idea of the gift that awaits their discovery. There is so much more to the Christian faith than most people, even most Christians, begin to realize.

So do not stop at unwrapping the gifts bought in the shops! On this day of Christmas, above everything else, focus your attention on the gift that comes from above.

Contemplate again the limitless generosity of our self-giving God, the amazing grace of One who so loved the world that he gave his only son.

Tear open the package! Glimpse anew the wonder of God's love! Receive afresh the strange gift of joy!

And hear again those angels sing!

*