

## SERMON ADVENT 3 JOY

I wonder if you have seen the film “Love Actually”. It has now become a regular feature on TV in the Christmas season because it is set in this time of year. One of the loveliest bits, to my mind, is right at the start, and again at the end, when there are scenes from the arrivals hall at Heathrow airport. The faces of these people, old and young and from so many different cultures, are just so joyful as they embrace the loved ones they have been waiting for. I could watch them time and again. Clive watches the whole movie time and again.

Today we are thinking about joy. We have now lit the candles of hope, peace and joy, and their light is burning there. When I spoke about hope on the first Sunday in Advent, I said that these themes, and we can add in Love here, the theme for next Sunday, these are clearly all connected.

They are deep human emotions. They are also much more than that. They are part of the very essence of faith. The bottom line is that we can speak of hope, peace, joy and love because of what we see Christ as done for us, what he has taught, lived and demonstrated; the example he has called us to follow. When we listen to what Paul writes, we often hear this. In Romans 15 he is writing from a place of difficulty. He refers to “everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in Scripture, we might have hope. May God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Then, a few verses later, he writes the much-loved words: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit”.

Hope, peace, joy and love arise out of our being rooted and grounded in the faith in what Christ has already given us. That is the foundation of it all.

These core things are all there for us. But we don't always find them, grasp and take hold of them. We seem to reach out more closely to them at this time of year when the celebration of the God's incarnation comes nearer, with all its mystery and its imagery, yet it seems that at other times we need something else to remind us of the source of what our faith tells us. We have faith in Christ at the base of it all, but there is also another level, another way that is also God-given and that leads us to hope, peace, joy and love.

I want to suggest today that there are many things around us that are waiting for us to pause and to be open to, many things that are joyful even if they are not specifically framed in the language of faith, though, I believe, they are part of God's presence with us. We have thought about the scenes of joyful reunion in *Love Actually*, which were real situations. These are many things that are connected with that deep yearning in our hearts for things of hope and peace, and now joy and with love. These things are also connected, in a special way, to what we might understand as beauty. Can you sense that connection? I would like to read you a poem, "Beauty", by Katrina Lambert:

Beauty lives

In the hollow of the itch you can't reach.

It's the first jolt of recognition –

a reflection of something

deep and hidden within us.

Beauty lies

In the stitched line of the horizon.

It's second gift is the joy of communion –  
A joining of our inner world  
With the boundless sky of billions of heavenly bodies.

Beauty inhabits  
A time beyond time.  
Its third gift is the glory of eternity –  
As we are pulled through a pinhole in the present  
To the infinite beyond that is our true home coming.

C S Lewis became one of the best loved writers about the Christian faith in the twentieth century and is still widely read. His book, 'Surprised by Joy' is an account of his journey from atheism to theism and then to Christianity. It was beauty and joy that led him along that journey. He speaks of joy as being like a signpost, pointing the way to those lost in the woods. He said that its appearance was not as important "when we have found the road and are passing signposts every few miles."

Does it feel like that to you? Are our eyes open to noticing signposts every few miles or kilometres? I think that sometimes we can see, but at other times we can become blinded by the concerns of everyday life. Still, as we have described when thinking of hope and peace, there remains a hungering: a hungering for what we find of beauty, something described as "a reflection of something hidden deep within me", as that poem of Katherine Lambert suggests. Michael Frost sees that, hidden deep within us, is an unconscious yearning for perfection, and that anything sublime or flawless stimulates that longing. C S Lewis named this yearning as *sehnsucht*, a German word that describes "the inconsolable longing in the heart for we know not what." Lewis goes on to speak of "that unnameable something, desire for which pierces us

like a rapier at the smell of a bonfire burning, the sound of wild ducks flying overhead, the title of *The Well at the World's End*, the opening lines of *Kubla Khan*, the morning cobwebs in the late summer, or the noise of falling waves.” It isn't these things in themselves that we desire. They arouse something in us. Mike Frost says “when beauty gives us that tweak of recognition we can be sure it is evidence of our spiritual intuition and work”. He goes on to say that the story of Advent is the news that our hunger can be satisfied, our yearning sated. Christ has come to fulfil our deepest desires, known and unknown, acknowledged and unacknowledged. The hopes of all humanity that are found in the birth of Christ will be fully satisfied as Christ's second coming.

What all this is saying is that all the things in creation that awaken our longing by showing us the wonder and beauty around us, all these things join us with the universe. The beauty of a starlit sky or a walk along a beach connects us to the Creator. It is said that the great conductor Toscanini once visited the Grand Canyon, and, after gazing at it, burst into applause. It was all he could do.

Joy wells up within us when we catch a glimpse of God around us and the revelation that, in God, we are part of God's work, part of everything in Creation. We are brought into communion. The joy of this communion in God is that it is timeless; there are no barriers to exclude, no qualifications to belong, only an open heart, because what is given is pure gift. It means that this joy of communion can be found even when things are not so beautiful, but when we see the urge towards hope, peace and love breaking through struggle and shadow. So it is not surprising that joy is an Advent word. The story that Advent points us towards is a story of joy because it tells us that disadvantage and marginalisation are no barriers to God finding people and drawing everyone into joyful communion. Advent prepares us for a story of joy

when the doors of heaven are opened and angels sing. Maybe we don't expect angels to sing around us, but we can and should expect to see the things that show us God's ongoing love at work around us, in everything. The only thing that diminishes it is that our focus wavers and we believe that the ties that bind us to earth are tightly knotted. They aren't. Whichever of the Christmas stories we read, in Matthew or Luke, the people who rejoiced at Jesus' birth were freed from their normal restrictions, such as the shepherds watching their flocks, while the wise men were free enough to look up to see a star and to follow it. Advent opens us up in expectation of what we already know- the wonderful and deep yearning, Lewis's *sehnsucht*, – that understands that God's presence of love will be born again. We rejoice because this revelation is woven into all of life and all of time. There is nothing, even in our times of darkness and loss, in the pain and struggle of the world, even in our loss of love, of faith – nothing that can take this birth of God's grace and love among us away.

Down the years this message has echoed and it reaches beyond us into God's time. To quote Katrina Lambert's last stanza again, "Beauty inhabits, a time beyond time. It's third gift is the glory of eternity – as we are pulled through a pinhole in the present to the infinite beyond that is our true homecoming.

Beauty, the beauty of hope, peace, joy and love. Can you hear the angels sing and creation rejoicing? They call us to rejoice with them.