

## Joy

Paul tells us in his letter to the Galatians that "... the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law." (Galatians 5:22-23a)

Note that he says the fruit of the Spirit is not that the fruits of the Spirit are. All of those things make up what the Spirit brings into our lives. It's a package – we get the lot. We all get love, joy, peace, patience, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Of course, how much of that fruit we exercise in our lives – and how much of that fruit can be seen in our lives – is up to each one of us.

Sometimes we find it easier to exercise some parts of the fruit than others, and I think the one people most often claim not to have is patience. But in many ways, patience is the easiest part of the fruit of the spirit to exercise – because you know the great thing about patience? ...You don't have to do anything. You just wait. And the season of Advent is a time of waiting. Think about the Old Testament prophecies about the messiah... and the people had to wait. Or think about the angel Gabriel visiting Mary and telling her about the arrival of the messiah... and she had to wait. Think about Jesus' death on Good Friday, and the terrible wait for the disciples until the news of the resurrection reached them. Think about the wait from Jesus' ascension to his return – something we are waiting for today.

So that's patience. Maybe the one part of the fruit that people most often claim they don't have.

But I think the most neglected part of the fruit of the spirit, is joy. Things are so serious, aren't they? Following Jesus is a serious business, isn't it?

And yes, it is serious, but it should also be joyful. At least some of the time. Because Jesus is good news! And we should be joyous in response to that good news.

We talk about good news in the church... but often that good news is serious business.

We are reminded of Jesus' words, "Your sins are forgiven" and we respond typically, with great solemnity, "Thanks be to God". In our liturgy today, I changed that to "Hallelujah!" "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests." Did you feel more joyous?

How often do you feel joyous?

Because we all want to be joyous, don't we? And not just us here, but all people, really? And especially at Christmas time. After all, that's why we go to the shops in such numbers, isn't it? Modern Australian society might not care much for Christianity, but it puts an awful lot of effort into Christmas. Because we want to make Christmas a joyous time. No sooner has the Melbourne Cup been run, Australia starts gearing up for the festive season.

We want to make it a joyous time...

Today's reading from Zephaniah is a song of joy. "Sing, Daughter Zion; shout aloud, Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart ..."

There's not much room for doubting there, is there? It's definitely joyful.

Zephaniah is one of the minor prophets. One of the twelve books of the Old Testament, which are grouped together for practical purposes. Not because they're of lesser importance, but because the books of the minor prophets are short. In the synagogues, they're grouped together on one scroll.

Our reading from Zephaniah today is one of encouragement, and hope, and especially joy.

There's so much in there: Zephaniah talks about what God has done, is doing and will do, and the response that Zephaniah asks for isn't for thank offerings and it isn't for humble gratitude, what he asks for ... is joy – joyous singing.

And not only that: Zephaniah tells us that God will be glad and that God will rejoice over his people with loud singing. We don't hear much about God singing, do we? And yet, Zephaniah (3:17) tells us that God will.

People sometimes talk about the kind and loving God of the New Testament and the harsh and vengeful God of the Old, but I think that idea isn't borne out by what the scriptures tell us, and here, tucked away right near the end of the Old Testament in the book of Zephaniah, is this picture of God who is kind and loving and joyous – and who sings over his people.

Yes, Zephaniah tells us there is some harsh treatment for those who are the enemies of the people of God – he has turned back your enemy in verse 15, he will be the might warrior in verse 17 and he will 'deal with' oppressors in 19, but that is pretty soft, and the focus of Zephaniah's song is on joy.

Not the fleeting joy of opening presents on Christmas morning, or of tucking in to a really nice Christmas dinner, or even the joy of friends and family briefly reunited. But lasting joy. Everlasting joy. The joy that is part of the fruit of the spirit in each one of us. The joy that we have in what God has done for us, and God's joy over us.

Jesus said "...there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent." (Luke 15:7)

To be fair, much of the earlier part of the book of Zephaniah does talk about coming judgement, judgement on Israel's enemies, the wickedness of Jerusalem and the punishment of the other nations. So, on the surface, harsh and vengeful seems to fit the bill.

But if we dig a bit more deeply, we find a different picture. It's not God throwing down thunderbolts arbitrarily, instead, it's God fixing problems.

Who doesn't want to see an end to apathy and complacency? By governments, organisations or individuals?

Who doesn't want to see an end to people being led away from God?

Who doesn't want to see an end to corruption?

Who doesn't want to see an end to the selfishness and self-interest that divides countries and communities and families?

Who doesn't want to see an end abusing people and abusing world's resources?

Who doesn't want to see an end to murder, and theft and greed?

Who doesn't want to see an end to oppression?

Who doesn't want to see God bring an end to suffering?

Because all those things are what God's judgement is addressing. And then we get to verses 12b and 13 of Chapter 3, when Zephaniah prophesies "The remnant of Israel will trust in the name of the Lord. They will do no wrong; they will tell no lies. A deceitful tongue will not be found in their mouths. They will eat and lie down and no one will make them afraid."

But by verse 20, Zephaniah tells us "'At that time I will gather you; at that time I will bring you home. I will give you honour and praise among all the peoples of the earth when I restore your fortunes before your very eyes," says the Lord."

Now is the season of advent. When we remember that God did bring his people home – not by bringing them physically to him, but by sending his Son to his people. God sent his son to us, as a child born in a stable. A child who would live and die and rise again and ascend to heaven.

And we remember the presence of the Holy Spirit with us. The Holy Spirit who gives us spiritual fruit: love, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self control and the most commonly forgotten one: joy. The fruit which transform us now, so that we will grow in the love and knowledge and joy of God.

And we remember and look forward to the fulfilment of God's plan. When Jesus will return in glory and "He will wipe every tear from [our] eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things [will have] passed away." (Rev 21:4)

The lead up to Christmas, as joyful as we try to make it, can be a hard time. People often find themselves upset, angry, mournful, sad or lonely. Sometimes all of those things. Why aren't people more joyful at this time? Why do our well-planned social gatherings often cause anger and sorrow and disappointment?

It is supposed to be a joyful time, but it so often reminds us of the joys we don't have. Or the joys we no longer have. We remember Christmases past, and particularly we remember people who are no longer with us.

I think it's because we all long for something more than the world can provide. Beyond the tinsel, and the lights, and the present and the food and drink.

As I reflected last week, people often focus on trying to achieve perfection for Christmas. The perfect decorations, the perfect family gatherings, the perfect events, the perfect food, the perfect presents. But those things don't satisfy.

I remember, as a child, gleefully opening presents, with my parents and grandparents looking on at my delight. I had received great presents. Carefully selected presents. I was richly blessed. It was fantastic. I was overjoyed. But then I looked around and there were no more presents left to open, and I was sad.

In the remaining days leading up to Christmas, we need to remember, and to celebrate the season of Advent. Remember to celebrate the presence of God. The God who was, and is, and is to come.

Again, as I reflected last week, we mustn't let Christmas distract us from God. And I don't mean that we need to be solemn and serious about it. We don't need to reject the tinsel and the lights and all the rest of it that some people choose to reject.

Enjoy it all. Enjoy the time with the people you love. Go and see the lights. Sing the carols – yes, even Santa Claus is Coming to Town and Six White Boomers. Eat the food. Watch your favourite Christmas movies. Be joyous.

All these things are gifts from God, and we can enjoy them. But as we enjoy those things, let's remember God's greatest gift to us. The one that brings us lasting joy. The gift of a saviour, born in humble circumstances, who died for us, and opened the way to everlasting life for all of those who turn to him in faith.

As Paul said to the Philippians: Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!

And we can rejoice with God, as God sings over us.

Amen