

## **Advent: The Names Say it All** **Isaiah 9**

So this is last Sunday in Advent. And we've been seeing how when it comes to Advent and Christmas the names that get given to the key players tell us a whole load about what God is up to at Christmas.

But this morning, I want to start by taking you to the announcement that the angel makes to the shepherds that first Christmas Eve. Look what he says: "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people" (Luke 2:10). So Christmas is about something that has happened that is so good that it will be a source of joy, universal joy, joy not just for these shepherds, but for all people.

So let me ask you, how would you rate the level of joy in your life at the moment? Because the truth is that there are plenty of things in life that can sap and deplete our joy aren't there? And there are times when it feels as if it's not just your tank of energy that's running low, but your tank of joy as well.

But how you answer that question depends on your definition of joy. So here's mine: joy is that deep, settled assurance that all is well, it's a deep sense of wellbeing that overflows in gladness and thankfulness and pleasure and delight.

So, if we define joy like that, how is your joy level? Now, whatever it is, I doubt that any of us would answer, 'I've got too much joy, I've exceeded my capacity, and all this joy I have is causing me problems and I need to get rid of some.' I don't think any of us would say we have *too much* joy, or that we wouldn't gladly welcome some more.

The problem comes, of course, when you start to think of where you find your joy. Because if you get that wrong, rather than this thing increasing your sense of inner wellbeing, rather than your heart overflowing with gladness, if you seek and find joy in the wrong places over time it will slowly rot your heart. And your capacity to experience true joy will diminish, and your heart will constrict, not expand.

Which brings us back to Advent and Christmas. Because the angel is saying that something has happened that is going to be a source of spreading joy for all people. Which includes you. And this is what's happened, v11: "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a saviour, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11).

And this morning I want us to see why the coming of Christ can be this source of growing joy in your life. But to do that I want to take you back to around 700 years before Christ, to Isaiah the prophet. Because Isaiah gives us some other names this baby in Bethlehem is going to be called. And understand these names and we'll understand why joy can be ours, and not just at Advent.

### **Isaiah 9:1-7**

#### **Darkened Hearts**

Now to understand this passage properly you need just a little context. The people of God are split into two nations: Israel in the north and Judah in the south. And in the northern kingdom of Israel the kings have led the people into

outright paganism and in the southern kingdom of Judah, King Ahaz is increasingly aligning himself with the pagan empires around him. As a result, judgment is coming. And in just a few years the Assyrian empire will invade and plunge Israel in the north into darkness. And the first part of the country over whom the dark shadow of invasion will fall is Zebulun and Naphtali, the area of Israel around the Sea of Galilee.

And it's in this dark area that Isaiah sees a light that's going to dawn. And Isaiah is so confident of this that he writes about it as if it's already happened: Verse 1-2, 'There will be no more gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he [God] brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.' And 700+ years later it's in this very area that Jesus began his ministry.

But if the lights were going to go out for these people, if they were going to be plunged into darkness by the Assyrian invasion because of their and their leaders' sin, the hard truth is that the same can be true of us, can't it? Our own hearts and lives can be darkened by the stuff we shouldn't do or think or say that we do do, and the stuff we should do but we don't do. And whilst we may not experience the kind of national calamity that befell Israel, wrong choices on our part can still cast a shadow over our hearts and rob us of joy. Stuff which seems so good at the time - that cutting remark, or getting that thing, or harbouring that grudge or clicking that link - it promises so much joy, do it and you'll be happy, and you buy into its promise, only for it leave you worse off, and your heart darker at the end than the beginning.

But of course it doesn't have to be sin by you that leaves you feeling like life is dark and joy is in short supply. There are the sins of others against you, and the sheer struggles and weariness and the grief and loss of life can do it.

And yet, it's into exactly that kind of darkness that the bright shining light of Christ's coming can break.

### **Overflowing Joy**

Listen at how Isaiah describes the joy that can come to those experiencing darkness: Verse 3, 'You [that's God] have multiplied the nation; you have increased its joy, they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil.'

Now, often you'll hear that your personal happiness, whether or not you will be miserable or joyful, depends on you. And there's some truth in that, isn't there? Often how you react to a situation is down to you. But look what Isaiah says: 'You - God - have increased its joy.' In other words, joy, real joy, growing, increasing, expanding joy, the kind of joy that can break into darkness and make your heart swell, is not something you and I can manufacture or whip up, instead it comes from God, as his gift in our lives.

And Isaiah gives two fascinating little pictures to describe the measure of joy that God has in store for his people, and both are the joy of celebration. Verse 3 again, 'they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest.' Now, most of us haven't got a clue about farming, we've never experienced the joy of a bumper harvest, and the feast that follows. But maybe you know the thrill of completing a deal, or reaping the reward for work you've done with a large bonus at the end of the year. It's the joy of the harvest.

And then there's the joy of the battle won: 'they rejoice before you... as they are glad when they divide the spoil' (v3). It's the joy of the soldiers who return from a mission, having defeated the enemy, and share out the bounty. It's the joy of victory, that surge of delight and sheer pleasure when your team wins the cup final, and there are the songs and the cheers and the backslapping.

And it's that kind of joy, the overflowing thankfulness of harvest, the elation of victory, that God has in store for those who are going through darkness.

The question is, how do you get it? Well, Isaiah gives us three reasons why those who dwell in darkness are going to know light and joy, and he introduces each one with 'For'.

#### **For The Burden is Lifted**

Verse 4, 'For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.' So light is going to shine, and joy is going to come, because God is going to break the oppressive hold of darkness on his people. And Isaiah says it's going to happen: 'as on the day of Midian.' Now, what's the day of Midian?

Well, if you know the story, you'll know it refers to how God used Gideon to deliver the people of Israel from the power of the Midianites.

Great, but what's so remarkable about that? Well, when God chose Gideon he chose a nobody, and a not-particularly brave nobody at that. And step-by-step God whittled Gideon's army of thirty-two thousand down to 300 men against an army of Midianites that was impossible to count. And yet against all the odds, against ridiculous odds, this nobody Gideon and his 300 men defeated the enemy, and lifted the weight of oppression off the people.

And Isaiah has seen that God is going to do something equally crazy again. God is going to break the oppressive power of darkness – the kind of stuff that robs you of joy - and cause light to shine in your darkness, by doing something as seemingly ridiculous and weak and against the odds as Gideon's 300 men against a superpower.

Ok, but how is God going to do that? Well, that's the second reason Isaiah gives.

#### **For The Enemy is Defeated**

Verse 5, 'For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire.' So light and overflowing joy are going to come to those in the shadow of darkness, because

God is going to lift their burden by finally defeating their enemy. And the picture Isaiah paints is of the tramping boots of the invading enemy being silenced and their blood soaked uniforms being burnt in fire. In other words: total victory.

Sure, but how is that victory against the enemies of our souls which rob us of joy going to happen? Well, that's the thing that looks as ridiculous as Gideon and his men against hundreds of thousands of Midianites, and it's the third of Isaiah's 'for's. And the answer is the birth of a baby boy.

### **For the Son has Come**

Verse 6, 'For to us a child is born, to us a son is given.' So Isaiah is saying that those who know what it is to have the shadow of darkness fall across their lives can know light and overflowing joy, and the burden of oppression can be lifted, and the enemy that robs us of joy can be defeated, because of this baby whose birth the angels announced in Bethlehem.

And he tells us that all that can be true because of who this baby is, because of what he will be called.

Verse 6 again: 'For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.'

Now, the American sociologist Christian Smith investigated the religious attitudes of young people in America. And to describe his findings he coined the term Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. He describes how many young people believe in living a basically moral life – that God wants you to be good and nice and fair to others. That's the moral part. Secondly, God wants you to be happy – and especially to feel good about yourself, that's the therapeutic part. God's your therapist. And the Deism part is that most young people believed that God isn't really needed in your life unless you had a problem that needed solving. He's an arms-length God.

So basically, do good, and God is there, should you need him, as your therapist. But that's a million miles from what Isaiah says here. He says the birth of Christ can bring you ever growing joy, not because he is some hands-off therapist, giving you non-directional counselling should you need it, but because he is the Wonderful Counsellor. Because he will lead you and guide you and instruct you. Later on, in Isaiah 11, Isaiah says: 'And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding' (Is 11:2). So this baby born in a stable in the backwoods, is the ultimate wise leader. Where other leaders, political or business or religious, can ruin their people's lives, Christ will bring freedom and deliverance and joy by his counsel. So Advent tells you that you don't need to stumble alone in the darkness, the one who has come is the Good Shepherd who will lead you through the valley of the shadow of death, and out into the light, who will speak truth to you that sets you free.

But the second name Isaiah says he will be called is Mighty God. So in that manger, in the squalid poverty of that stable, in this small vulnerable newborn baby dwells the one for whom nothing is impossible. The one who with a word

commands a universe to exist, and a leper to be clean, and the dead to come forth and the storm to be stilled. The one whom death could not hold. And Mary and Joseph were told to call him Jesus – the Lord saves. And if he is the mighty God, then he is an almighty saviour, and nothing can stand in the way of his saving power in your life. There is nothing in your past that he cannot forgive, there is nothing in your present or your future that can stand in the way of his love or his joy for you.

And when the choir of angels broke into song that first Christmas Eve they sang, 'Glory to God in the highest' (Luke 2:14), because the coming of the Son of God as a saviour does just that: it glorifies God. And one of the reasons we can sometimes be so short of joy in our lives is that we are self-focused. With moralistic therapeutic deism we think God exists to make us happy, to make much of us, whereas the truth is that we exist to glorify God and make much of him. And true joy comes as we live for God and his glory, as he increases and we decrease. And as it dawns on us that lying in that manger is the mighty God who has come to humble himself to save us, we'll humble ourselves to serve and glorify him and as we do our joy will grow.

Then the third name Isaiah gives us is Everlasting Father. Now, when Isaiah calls him that, he doesn't mean Father as in God the Father – though Jesus was and is the exact representation of the Father, who could say, 'If you have seen me you have seen the Father.' Rather Isaiah means it in the way he and other Old Testament writers use it of leaders – like the father of a nation, or a father to the needy. In other words Christ is *the* protector, the one who doesn't look out for his own interests, but for yours, the one who will defend you and lay down his life to rescue you. The one who will work everything, whatever you are facing or going through, for your good. The ultimate leader, the everlasting Father.

Now, whether it's in politics or the workplace, or frankly even in the church, one trap you can fall into as a leader is that when things are good, you want the credit, but when things are bad you look for scapegoats – someone else must carry the can. We don't want to take the full responsibility of leadership. But in v6 Isaiah says that 'the government shall be upon his shoulder.' Christ will bear the full weight of rule and responsibility. He won't look for a scapegoat, instead he will become the scapegoat, as he carries the weight of the cross, the burden of our failure, upon his shoulder. And he bears it so we don't have to. And when you realise that, then the burden of sin and guilt lifts, and the light begins to shine and joy can begin to rise.

But fourthly and finally, Isaiah tells us he will be called Prince of Peace. Now, if you get caught up in a certain way of thinking, you find yourself looking for personal fulfilment in your success at work, or through impressing others in another area of your life, or in your status. And your wellbeing becomes dependent on what others think of you, or in how you're doing, or in what you have. And that's fine when things are going well, except of course that there's always this engine driving away underneath, needing the applause of others. But it's not so good when things are not going well and the applause and the admiration of others aren't coming. And then there is this restlessness and unhappiness and dissatisfaction, and peace and joy and inner wellbeing are gone.

But the angels say to the shepherds: 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth *peace* among those with whom he is pleased' (Luke 2:14). And the coming of Christ offers a level of peace and joy our striving can never give, because it offers us a deep sense of acceptance by God that is not dependent on our performance.

But the peace that this Prince of Peace brings goes deeper than just our inner peace. It is peace with God. You see the apostle John writes that 'the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil' (1 John 3:8). And putting it really simply, the works of the devil are sin. The sin that separates, the sin that trashes and slimes, and it doesn't just wreck our horizontal relationships, it wrecks our relationship with God our Father. It's the sin that puts enmity between us and God. And John says the reason Christ came was to destroy all that at the cross. And because Christ breaks the power of sin at the cross God declares an amnesty, a free pardon, peace to you as you put your trust in him. The peace of arms laid down, the peace of full and free forgiveness, the peace of full citizenship in the kingdom of God's grace. And as it dawns on you that he has come and secured your peace, light begins to dawn and joy begins to stir.

So as Christmas approaches, with all its reasons for joy and celebration, let God fill your heart with light and joy knowing that the Wonderful Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace has come. And his names say it all.