

Sunday 20 December 2020

Advent 4

A time for joy

God, we come to you in our waiting.

We wait in excitement:

We are ready to celebrate!

We know the story with its humbleness, simplicity, and wonder.

God, help us to nurture our joy.

As our time of waiting draws towards its great climax, even in the face of much uncertainty in these strange and troubling times, we choose to worship God in the words of the ancient song.

⁴⁶ My soul magnifies the Lord,
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
⁴⁸ for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever. (Luke 1:46–55)

The words of this song share much in common with the Psalms. They are carefully constructed and follow a clear line of thought. Not all Scripture is crafted in this way. If we turn to the close of the letter to the church in Rome we find Paul pouring out a torrent of words as he draws his letter to a conclusion. It is very difficult to follow his train of thought. He is like a sports commentator, carried away as he describes the end of a close race or a late goal.

To God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages ²⁶ but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith— ²⁷ to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever!
Amen. (Romans 16:25–27)

The central thought of this blessing is found in the opening and closing words: "To God be the glory forever!" It seems, however, that Paul cannot resist expanding and enhancing this basic point. This God who Paul has been expounding in the previous chapters is able to strengthen the Roman Christians (and, by extension, us too). He does this in accordance with the Good News that is Jesus Christ. All this was planned beforehand, but only fully revealed recently and is now being proclaimed to all. This was always God's plan for he wanted all to come to know him through faith - now where was I?

Paul's excitement is seen in every phrase he adds to this ungrammatical sentence, right to the very end. Even when he kerbs his enthusiasm and tries to get back to the point he cannot quite make it. His final clause adds another level of ambiguity which has given Bible scholars and theologians something to think about ever since: to whom does Paul ascribe glory - to the only wise God, or to Jesus Christ? The Greek text is unclear, and I suspect if we were to ask Paul he would answer, "Yes."

Paul was undoubtedly a great theologian, but his theology, his understanding of the works of God in and through Jesus, was never detached from real, everyday life. His teaching always had a practical application and often, as here, an emotional element too. As Paul has set out his understanding of the Good News and its implications to the church in Rome he is left with one overwhelming feeling - joy. It is this joy that bursts out in this final blessing, out-shinning all else, including his grasp of grammar.

We pause and pray that this same joy that comes from knowing the strength of God in our lives, even (and especially) in difficult times will be ours this Advent time, through Christmas and into the New Year.

Pause and pray

As we close we share in the joy that has always been the treasured possession of all God's people.

¹ I will sing of your steadfast love, O LORD, forever;
with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations.

² I declare that your steadfast love is established forever;
your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens. (Psalm 89:1f)

And as we wait may we know the joy of God this Advent.

May I be filled with joy, Lord,
because you sent your Son to rescue me,
because Jesus is the centrepiece of everything.

May the joy I have
be life-transforming,
be infectious,
be the driving force behind everything I do and say.

Amen.