

This is the final Sunday in Advent, the season of preparation and waiting, before celebrating God's gift of the birth of His Son, Jesus our Christ.

Advent can be a confusing time. The main focus of Advent is naturally, to prepare for the celebration of the arrival of the Son of God, who left the safety and security of Heaven, clothed Himself in human form to live among us.

The danger of focusing on celebrating the arrival of the Son of God, is that we live our Christian faith with hindsight, looking back in time to that moment when Jesus was born. Jesus remains the "*Baby Jesus in a manger*", gazed upon by two dotting parents, sheep, shepherds and three wise men, the typical nativity scene we have created for ourselves.

What we then miss is the Angel Gabriel's complete message to Mary. Having announced she has found favour with God and will carry the Christ-Child, he went on to say, "*He shall be very great and shall be called the Son of God. The Lord God shall give him the throne of his ancestor David. He shall reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom shall never end!*"¹

The birth of Jesus is the beginning of the story of salvation; the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is the fulfilment of God's prophesy of salvation!

But Advent and Christmas is so much more than the fulfilment of prophesy made 700 years prior. The language of Advent and Christmas goes beyond the Baby-in-a-manger. It is about the Resurrected Christ who **now** lives among us in the person of the Holy Spirit, and it is about the Risen Christ who was victorious over death, who sits on the throne of David and to whom God will give His kingdom on earth, to be His for ever and ever!

In its fullest form, Christmas is about celebrating the complete life of Jesus the Christ, He who taught us to pray, *Our Father in Heaven. May your name be honoured; May Your kingdom come and be established on earth, and Your Will be done on earth, as it is being done in Heaven!*² He taught us to pray for

¹ Luke 1:32-33

² Matthew 6:9-10

what He came to accomplish - God's will is being realised on earth as it is being done in Heaven!

I don't know about you, but I have neither heard nor attend the birth of a child at which the child's future is foretold with such clarity. At a funeral we pay tribute to a person's life, what they did and achieved, how they lived and impacted family, friends and society, because we have the benefit of hindsight, but at a child's birth, how would we know what the future holds for the child?

The Christ-Child is no ordinary child. The only one ever conceived by the Holy Spirit, He is a precious child. His ministry would be so critically important, He will require someone to precede Him, to prepare people for His arrival. John the Baptist would be the "warm-up act", inviting people to

"repent" of the way they lived their life.

In the Old Testament we learn of two ways to repent: **cultic-ritual** repentance (expressed in public displays of fasting, expressions of sorrow, uttering of liturgies, or days of repentance), and **prophetic** repentance (people "*returning to God*"), an emphasis on a change in our relationship with God.

Jesus taught us **prophetic** repentance, the return into fellowship with God through a restored relationship with Him. It starts by confessing we had the wrong idea about God, and then, leaving behind our wrong ideas about God, to follow Him by accepting His leadership in **all** things.

Advent-Christmas is about reflecting on the complete life of Jesus who is our Christ, our Saviour

Through the Advent-Christmas texts, there is one word which runs through every event, leading to and beyond the birth of Christ, and that is **JOY!**

The mood starts with the Angel Gabriel giving the priest Zachariah the good news *that God has heard your prayer, and your wife, Elizabeth, will bear you*

a son! And you are to name him John. You both will have **great joy and gladness at his birth, and many will rejoice with you.**³

Zechariah's response challenged the Angel Gabriel, *This is impossible! I'm an old man now, and my wife is also well along in years.* Gabriel had been sent to set the mood of joy on earth, and he would not have any one spoil it, so Zechariah had to be "silenced" for nine months until his son's birth, when he burst into joy-filled praise, *Praise the Lord, the God of Israel, ... He has been merciful to our ancestors*⁴.

Gabriel's message to Mary was the same he gave to Zechariah - *you will have a baby boy*, but her response to this news was different. Zechariah said, *This is impossible ...*, but Mary responded, *How can this be ...?*, was a mix of emotions: consternation, incredulity and joy. When she comes to terms with it in cousin Elisabeth's home, *"Oh, how I praise the Lord. How I rejoice in God my Saviour!..."* and for the next nine verses, she praises God for the great things He has done, for His mercy, His power, His care for the humble in heart, and His promise to be merciful to Abraham, to Israel, now being fulfilled in her!

Joy overflowing from her heart and pouring out from her lips in uncontrolled praise!

In the account of Joseph's response, there is joy when *he obeyed the angel's instruction and brought Mary home to be his wife.*

The joy continues into the night of Jesus' birth: the angel declares to the shepherds, *I bring you the most joyful news (glad tidings) ever announced, and it is for everyone!* Then Heaven's choir rejoices that the baby was safely delivered on earth, was alive and kicking.

A band of shepherds on the hills around Bethlehem were the first to hear the good news. They hurried to *see this wonderful thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.*

³ John 1:13-14

⁴ Luke 1: 68 & 72

And as they returned to the field and to their flocks, they were praising God because they had *seen the child, just as the angel had told them.*

The mood of unbridled joy continues 40-days later when his parents take Jesus to Jerusalem to present him to God. The law of God said, *“If a woman’s first child is a boy, he shall be dedicated to the Lord”.*

On the day Mary and Joseph entered the Temple to dedicate Jesus, Simeon, a well-known resident of Jerusalem who lived a life devoted to the worship of God, was directed by the Holy Spirit to hold Him in his arms and praise God, *“Lord! Now I can die content! I have seen Him as you promised me I would. I have seen the Saviour you have given to the world. He is the Light that will shine upon the nations, and He will be the glory of your people Israel!”*

An old lady Anna who made the Temple her home having been widowed at an early age, also bursts into joy, praising God for the Saviour of Israel.

Finally, we don’t know how much after Jesus birth, a group of astrologers find their way to the home of Joseph and Mary to see *“the newborn King of the Jews”*

When the star they were following *stopped over the place where the child was, they were filled with joy!*⁵

I believe with all my heart, mind and soul, that the greatest joy there ever can be, is the joy of a restored relationship. A **restored relationship** is very special because it signals that the past is forgiven, and the future is full of hope that is achievable!

Given all that is going on around us, this Christmas presents us with a great opportunity to restore our relationship with God and with each other. Nothing would give God greater joy than seeing His Church working together as one. Shall we commit our-selves to pray, this becomes a reality among us?

AMEN.

⁵ Matthew 2:10