

What Should We Do?

Sunday 12 December 2021

Call to Worship

Isaiah 12:2-6

Surely God is my salvation;

**I will trust, and will not be afraid,
for the LORD GOD is my strength and my might;
he has become my salvation.**

With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And you will say in that day:

**Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name;
make known his deeds among the nations;
proclaim that his name is exalted.**

Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done gloriously;
let this be known in all the earth.

**Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion,
for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.**

Angels from the realms of glory

James Montgomery

Angels from the realms of glory

Wing your flight over all the earth

Ye, who sang creations story

Now proclaim Messiah's birth

Come and worship, come and worship

Worship Christ the newborn King

Shepherds in the fields abiding

Watching over your flocks by night

God with man is now residing

Yonder shines the Infant light

Come and worship, come and worship

Worship Christ the newborn King

Sages leave your contemplations

Brighter visions beam afar

Seek the great Desire of nations

Ye have seen His natal star

Come and worship, come and worship
Worship Christ the newborn King

Saints before the alter bending
Watching long in hope and fear
Suddenly the Lord, descending,
In His temple shall appear
Come and worship, come and worship
Worship Christ the newborn King

Prayer of Adoration and Confession

Lights on trees and in windows
Gifts sought
Gifts wrapped
Gifts sent
Carols playing in the background
Grass growing furiously
As the rain and the sun perform their magic
New potatoes ready to harvest
Strawberries waiting to be picked
We edge toward Christmas

Some are excited
Eagerly anticipating time with family and friends
Some are sad
Loved ones passed on or far away
Contrasts reflected in faces
Telegraphed in words and actions
Waiting breathlessly
For God, Immanuel
Here with us
Waiting
Watching
For you, for me

We bring our hearts before the Lord who knows our very thoughts and loves us none-the-less.

Reflection

Hallelujah Video

Notices

The Peace

God rest ye merry gentlemen

John Henry Hopkins (We Three Kings)

God rest ye merry, gentlemen,
Let nothing you dismay,
Remember Christ our Saviour
Was born upon this day;
To save us all from Satan's power
When we were gone astray.

O tidings of comfort and joy,
Comfort and joy,
O tidings of comfort and joy!

From God our heavenly Father
This blessed angel came;
And unto certain shepherds
Brought tidings of the same;
How that in Bethlehem was born
The Son of God by name.

O, star of wonder, star of night,
Star with royal beauty bright,
Westward leading, still proceeding,
Guide us to thy perfect light.

Born a king on Bethlehem's plain;
Gold I bring to crown Him again;
King forever, ceasing never,
Over us all to reign.

Glorious now behold Him arise,
King and God and sacrifice,
Hallelujah! Hallelujah!
Worshipping God most high.

God rest ye merry, gentlemen, let nothing you dismay
God rest ye merry, gentlemen, let nothing you dismay
God rest ye merry, gentlemen, let nothing you dismay

Reading

Luke 3:7-18

⁷ John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ⁹ Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

¹⁰ And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” ¹¹ In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” ¹² Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” ¹³ He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” ¹⁴ Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

¹⁵ As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶ John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

¹⁸ So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

Message

What Should We Do?

What does Christmas mean to you? Take a moment to talk about it with your neighbour.

I want to take a few minutes to talk about an aspect of Christmas that is often forgotten. As a teenager I was part of a large and active youthgroup at my church. We would get out doing all sorts of things. One Christmas Eve we decided it would be nice to go around to some of the older members of the congregation and sing Christmas carols. We were part way through the evening and discussing who could be next on our round. I suggested my grandmother, who lived with us. So we all climbed into cars and went around and started singing carols. My mum came out and listened with a couple of my younger siblings, but my grandmother refused to come out. I couldn't understand why and was quite put out. We finished singing and headed off to do some more carols elsewhere.

When I got home afterwards I asked why my Gran hadn't come out. I hadn't known that my Dad's brother, Uncle Bob, had died on Christmas Eve in the Tangiwai disaster. For my Gran, Christmas, and Christmas Eve in particular, was a time of grieving. Taking the carol singers to sing to her that night was an unfortunate reminder of her grief. As time has passed, I have realised that for many people Christmas is not a time of celebration at all. It serves as a reminder of what they have lost. Partners, parents, children, friends, pets. It is highly likely that there are people here today who are struggling with grief in the leadup to Christmas. Unfortunately, our culture of bravado and 'I can fix this,' means that we are profoundly ill-equipped to deal with grief at the best of times, and especially so at times like Christmas when everything is supposed to be spry and happy.

Now, before we proceed I want to distinguish between two kinds of grief. The first is that grief that grips us and seems to be breaking us down little by little. The pain never seems to quite go away, and even small things can remind us and bring us to tears. Like a favourite mug or a child's toy, or even a loved TV show. People sometimes talk about stages of grief, but I think that oversimplifies a profound and unique experience for every individual. I can never say that I understand your grief, even if it seems that my experience is the same as yours, because it is your grief and not mine. My siblings had a different experience of my dad's death to that of my own. We were all there at the same time, but our lives are different and so our perceptions and responses were different too. I have an image of my dad on my computer screen saver and whenever it comes up I find myself saying, 'I miss you, dad.'

The other kind of grief is a little different. I don't want to minimise the experience in what I say here. For the people who go through this it is just as difficult as the first kind, and may, in fact, have been exactly the same as the first to begin with. This grief has become like a warm, comfortable blanket. We can find ourselves turning to it when life becomes difficult and use it to fend off the cruel and unkind world. It turns into an excuse to not deal with anything that is too hard – 'Oh, you don't understand how I feel.' It is a valid and real understanding of the world. If this is how you experience your grief it might be a good idea to get some help to work through it because just like a splinter in a wound, if it is not dealt with it will fester and cause much greater pain.

You may be wondering at this point how on earth I ended up here from our reading. I briefly mentioned our number-8-wire culture of bottling things up and failing to deal with stuff that is causing us pain. Kiwi males are commonly associated with suppressing their emotions – the whole big boys don't cry thing. Somewhat to my surprise I have discovered that women are often not much different. On the outside they may be more inclined to cry, but on the inside the emotions are often suppressed just as vigorously as the men. We hide our grief with all nature of things, not realising that somewhere, somehow, it will find its way out, and often in unhelpful ways. Anger, callousness, violence, stinginess, promiscuity, addiction, all manner of anti-social behaviours can be rooted in undealt with grief. It's not the final answer, but it has a place in helping to understand some of how we behave.

All of which makes it interesting to see how John responded to the people coming to him to be baptised. It is likely that many of the people coming to John were filled with that same kind of bravado and outward confidence that masked their pain, keeping it hidden from the rest of the world. John's response to them is hardly the recommended process for therapy, but it seems to have cut through the walls and barriers that people had erected to keep the world out. I want to imagine out loud how he may have said it today, although perhaps a little less pithily than John.

You liars and thieves. You can see the world is going to hell in a handbasket and you thought by coming to me you could paper over the façade of your bland existence. You have no rights. You have no entitlement to some kind of better life. If you want something better then you need to earn it.

There's no encouraging you to get in touch with your inner self or make lists of how you are feeling or what makes you sad. This is brutal and straight to the point. He has 30 seconds to make his pitch and there it is. You want gentle, pay for a therapist.

What is fascinating here is that the people coming to John understood what he was saying. More than that, they engaged with him, looking for solutions to their predicament. "What should we do?"

Now, look at the answers John gave:

Share your excess
Do your job honestly

That's it. No hint of pray more or go to church or fast on Tuesdays or anything like that. Share your excess and do your job honestly. And look at the summary of that message – it was Good News.

Imagine you are coming to see John. You are burdened down with grief or the cares of life. You are hoping for a revelation from God. Perhaps this is the Messiah, the answer to all your problems. He begins by pointing out that you're a mess, and you have no rights. Then he essentially tells you to treat other people well. It doesn't seem like that kind of answer you may have expected. Of course, looking forward to Christmas, Jesus comes on the scene and proclaims the coming kingdom of God. And guess what, he says pretty much the same thing. For God loved the world so much he gave his only Son and whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. And the net effect of believing in Jesus? Treating yourself and others well. It kind of begs the question of why we seem so determined to tack on all the extras – read the Bible, church on Sunday, do this, do that, don't do this, don't do that.

So what does that have to do with grieving at Christmas? I think that one of the key messages at Christmas, from the church at least, should be to treat ourselves and others well. And that includes loving and being loved through our grief. Perhaps that means weeping with those who weep, or simply sitting with them, keeping company through the darkness. It could mean many things to different people. Most of all it is about sharing our excess – whether that be of joy, or grief and finding Christ in each other.

I leave you with this question:

What should you do this Christmas?

We Pray

Loving God, would you come to us in our grief and in our joy. We acknowledge that we have nothing to offer you. Yet you promise to gather us up as a mother hen gathers her chicks. Help us this Christmas to nestle into your love, knowing our need for you and secure in your love, no matter what else is going on in our lives. Teach us to share our excess with your people around us and strengthen us to be honest in all we do. In Jesus' merciful presence we pray. Amen.

Salvation belongs to our God

Pat Turner

Salvation belongs to our God
Who sits upon the throne
And unto the Lamb
Praise and glory
Wisdom and thanks
Honour and power and strength

Be to our God forever and ever
Be to our God forever and ever
Be to our God forever and ever, amen

And we the redeemed shall be strong
In purpose and unity
Declaring aloud
Praise and glory
Wisdom and thanks
Honour and power and strength

Offering

God who gives all gifts, in this season, we focus so much on giving gifts to one another. Help us, we pray, to remember what John the Baptist tells us is on your wish list: that we might bear fruit worthy of the repentance that is the very heart of this season: fruit of compassion, fruit of sharing, fruit by denying ourselves so that others who have little will have enough. In response to you, we give that our fruit might please you. In the Saviour's name, we pray. Amen.

Prayer for Ourselves and Others

For those who find Christmas a burden of grief remembered, we bring our prayers.

For those who find Christmas a time of hope and joy, we bring our prayers.

For those whose work has doubled and redoubled as Covid has expanded its reach. For those who are out of work and have lost livelihoods as Covid has expanded. We bring our prayers.

For leaders around the world as they grapple with disease, economic distress, political volatility, and war. We bring our prayers.

For ourselves, our family and friends and all those we connect with. We bring our prayers.

All these things we bring through the loving person of Jesus, who taught us how to pray...

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father in Heaven, holy be your name.

Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever.

Amen

It came upon the midnight clear

It came upon a midnight clear,

that glorious song of old,

from angels bending near the earth

to touch their harps of gold:

"Peace on the earth, good will to men,

from heaven's all-gracious King."

The world in solemn stillness lay,

to hear the angels sing.

Still through the cloven skies they come

with peaceful wings unfurled,

and still their heavenly music floats

o'er all the weary world;

above its sad and lowly plains,

they bend on hovering wing,

and ever o'er its Babel sounds

the blessed angels sing.

For lo! the days are hastening on,

by prophet seen of old,

when with the ever-circling years

shall come the time foretold

when peace shall over all the earth

its ancient splendours fling,

and the whole world send back the song

which now the angels sing.

Benediction and Grace

As we go from here may we be a people who treat ourselves and others well.
Sharing the excess, dealing honestly, being the light of Christ in our place.

May the Grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,
the Love of God,
and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit
be with us all, now and forevermore. Amen.