

St Mary's 11 am; Isaiah 61.1-4,8-11, Ps 126, 1 Thessalonians 5.16-24, John 1.6-8,19-28

I wonder what you have missed most over the last few months? Visiting family? meeting work colleagues? Travelling? I've missed something that I never thought I valued very much. I have missed celebrating. We have all had celebrations taken from us. Weddings have been postponed, Easter was socially distanced, and graduations happened online – if at all.

I had a significant birthday towards the beginning of the first lockdown, but it passed by with hardly a murmur. There were far more important things to worry about!

So I have been thinking about celebrations. Celebrations are times of joy, when we give thanks for the past, and we declare hope for the future.

We celebrate weddings – the coming together of two families. We give thanks for what has drawn these two people together – and have hope that love and blessing will flow from this relationship.

We celebrate retirement. We give thanks for the years of work and health, and have hope for freedom and blessing in the future.

We celebrate Easter – giving thanks for Jesus' death and resurrection, with the expectation and hope for his continued presence with us.

We celebrate with others, in community, giving thanks, offering hope, and it is part of being human. God made us to celebrate! If you doubt that, read your Bible again!

If I am honest, I don't feel much like celebrating. Nine months of restrictions with limited human contact have taken their toll. So I found today's passages quite a challenge because they are full of celebration. Three of them mention joy... 'Rejoice always'. 'the oil of joy', 'harvest of joy'. Today's Sunday is called Gaudete Sunday which means 'joy' – shown by the rose candle.

And our Old Testament passage continues: 'The Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news for the poor, to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives, and comfort those who mourn.' Jesus used these words to describe his own ministry and, if we are followers of Jesus, they become part of what we do. Between celebration, joy and freedom, I'm not sure that I feel up to the job.

But then I noticed a small phrase which changed my perspective. In Isaiah 61v3, the prophet writes to *those who grieve in Zion*. At this point in history, the Jews had gone into exile, and had returned. They should be celebrating. They should have been full of gratitude and hope. But life was not what they expected. Zion, or Jerusalem, was still broken. They were still struggling with sadness and grief. They were living with the tension between what they hoped for, and what was.

Isn't that the tension we live with constantly? We hope that others will respond to God's love, but they do not seem interested. We hope for a society which embodies equality and diversity,

but still recognise prejudice in others – and ourselves. We want to help others, but don't know what to do.

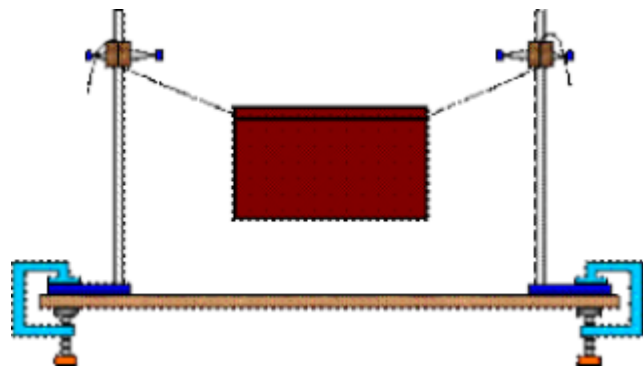
This world is full of marvellous things – great people, wonderful sunsets, incredible animals, - but it is still not what God intended. It contains unhealed brokenness, so our lives here will always have some tension.

So what can we do?

Maybe the first step is to copy John the Baptist. When he was asked, 'Are you the Messiah?', he said 'No'. We are not Jesus. We are only witnesses.

The second step is to realise that God rarely asks us to do some big thing to change the world, but he asks us to be faithful.

Last week, in school, I showed an experiment to my class. Here it is: a book hanging on a string. I asked a volunteer to move the book without touching it. As a hint, I gave her a straw. She gave some strong blows – and the book barely moves. But then she thought – and started giving little puffs. And that makes it swing.



We don't need to do great big things, just little things repeatedly.

We keep being kind to the grumpy neighbour, or the difficult pupil.

We keep in touch with those who are isolated.

We keep praying.

The OT passage speaks to those who employ others, whether as part of a business or because they clean for you, keep treating them justly and fairly.

For those on social media, remember the epistle 'test everything, hold fast to what is good.' In other words, we check what we read on social media and only pass on what is helpful and true.

It is the little seeds that God uses to spread righteousness across the world. All we are asked to do is keep sowing seeds of hope and righteousness. James Watt, whose statue dominates the chapel at the back, changed this area of Birmingham but not by doing one big thing. Even his famous steam engine was not fully his own work. Instead, he did lots of small things, improving the life of those around, contributing to this church, making machines more efficient.

We are not the Messiah, we are just called to live faithfully, sowing seeds of kindness and trusting that God will make them grow. When we look back and see what God has done, we

will celebrate. We will have gratitude for the past, and can step forward with hope into the future.

On this Gaudete Sunday, as we approach Christmas, we remember Jesus, his life and presence. We celebrate what he has done, and so we have hope for the future. Whatever Christmas is like, there will be life beyond coronavirus. There will be a world that needs righteousness, love, and faithfulness. We can be part of that. And that is a cause for celebration.

Dr Stephanie Hayton