

The Lord's Coming Gives Joy and Peace to His People

A Sermon for the Season of Christmas

Sermon The Person and Work of Christ 20 December 2020

Luke 2:14

Matthew 5:9

Absence of joy and peace in life gives way to anxiety. Anxiety, I like to describe as a thin stream of fear or worry trickling through our minds. If encouraged or left unchecked, it cuts a channel into which all our thoughts and feelings are drained, a devastating state of affairs. Think about it, and if this, even remotely, describes your state, then I would portray you as a person who always worries broadmindedly. You could be afraid of your past, present or future, or you could be worried about nothing in particular, and even worry why you are not worrying. The antonym for worry is joy and peace. As a precursor to our preparations to commemorate the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus on Christmas Day, we will today focus on how His birth has brought joy and peace to people who believe and accept Him as their Saviour and God, in this life, and in the expectation of life at His holy feet for eternity.

It is not news that we live in a world that gives us much to worry about. Now we hear about all the tragic events happening in any corner of the world almost instantaneously, and can watch the happenings even in real time on our television sets, computers and mobile telephones. Words like a pandemic, terror strikes, social injustice, the faceoff between countries, and religious crisis are too mild for what is happening at present. It is beyond the scope of such a description. Life has been cheapened, and humanity is being dragged deeper into the gutter every day. In all that is happening around us, there are more innocent victims than guilty ones. You would think that some creature out of hell, with his worriers, was stalking the streets of this world.

Living in such a stressful world, one would yearn to experience genuine joy and peace. Christmas is the time we recall the proclamation of the angel and the hosts of heaven, who appeared when God took birth as a child, and praised God, singing, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men." — Luke 2:14. A thought that bothers my mind is, have we missed a point here, and are we thinking amiss that the angels had put a stamp of peace on us when Jesus was born, and therefore peace and joy are forever with us? Immediately, I see the vision of Jesus struggling for breath on the Cross. We are overjoyed that all our sins have been nailed to the tree, and on His resurrection, we joyfully look forward to the Salvation which He promised. No wonder we call the day of His death Good Friday, or did we in error think that the word good is synonymous with God? Then it should have been God's Friday. That aside, it is generally perceived that the birth of Jesus brought peace, and His death and resurrection brought us the joy of Salvation. This perception is, however, not a licence for us to live wantonly.

This Christmas season I want to ask ourselves the question as to what it is that I and you are doing as agents of peacemaking for our Lord. One of the profound assertions of Jesus during His Sermon on the Mount was, "Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God." — Matthew 5:9.

Only when we attain the status of the children of God can we experience the joy of His parenthood. The evidence is before us in Paul. Paul did not just sit around and pontificate lofty theological ideas from a comfortable chamber. Paul, although an intellectual, was a practitioner. As an example, he contended for peace between a slave owner and a runaway slave. Are we prepared to move out of our comfort zones and be practical Christians, like Peter and Paul? Can we, when people ask why we are so joyful or so calm in this troubled world, point them to our Lord Jesus Christ? Or do we want to remain oblivious of the peace and joy Jesus spoke of? The thousands who had gathered in Bethlehem, on that night, were unmindful of the greatest of miracles that was unfolding amidst them, in quiet, sober and humble circumstances, the day the Word became flesh. Mary and Joseph had nothing to claim materialistically, but had the greatest possession: Jesus in their hands.

With that background, we will walk through a different track today, in contrast to the much-trodden one, year after year, about the 'peace and joy' of Christmas. And I will begin by making two observations. I want to agree with you that joy and peace are exceedingly desirable, and I hope and pray that you will be filled with the joy and peace of our Lord. I also pray that you do not become selfish, but rather that you wish others also to enjoy peace in Christ. I assume that you would consent to any personal loss, or suffer hardships, to bring peace and joy to the society around us, irrespective of their religious leanings, that they might also be reconciled to God by the blood of the Cross. At present, however, we stand in the way, by being judgemental through misrepresentation, and by sheer ignorance of the scriptural teachings. I grant that, perhaps, this is done unwittingly. In short, as Christians we must suffer sacrifice; we must function as prime movers, to first bring peace amongst the people around us, and then function as peace brokers between God and man.

A second thought I must venture to share with you is that one must take the utmost care while defining joy and peace. The yardstick for this evaluation should never be of this world, but the Gospel, lest we take the wrong path. Remember that worldly joy and peace, though desirable, tempting or pleasurable, are not infallible evidence of eternal security. If we make a mistake here, our peace is the false peace which does not rest upon the rock of divine truth, but upon the sand of our wild imaginations. Such people are like a man in a lifeboat who feels safe, but is ignorant of the fact that the lifeboat itself is in turbulent waters. Absolute security is only in the hands of Jesus. Just as the leaves on the tree prove that the tree is alive, but the absence of leaves will not prove that the tree is dead, so godly joy and peace, unlike that of this world, should be satisfactory evidence of eternal security, but the absence of joy and peace, during certain times in life, should not be construed as our facing eternal punishment, provided we have allowed Jesus to take birth in our hearts.

Believe that it were better for you to go all your life in assumed darkness, and to end in everlasting life — a life in the glorious presence of Jesus — than to enjoy much of what you thought to be heavenly joy and peace in this life, and then to go into outer darkness. One may be anxious to be happy, but be more anxious to be holy. Be eager for peace, but be more desirous of faith in Christ, from Whom the peace that passes all understanding flows. I like joy and peace, but I like better still the sacred faith that looks to Christ, and brings me joy and peace that is indefinable. Therefore, one must develop the ability to distinguish the true peace and joy of Jesus from what we imagine to be peace and joy. Our prayer should

be, "Lord, give me the comfort of Your presence, and let me not seek comfort other than from Thy holy hands."

So, what should be our thoughts this Christmas season? First, as Christians, believe that you are saved, and then happiness shall come of it; but you cannot believe that you are saved while you persist in doing what God does not like you to do, in the quest of perceived joy and peace — instead, look to the finished work of Jesus Christ.

The Holy Bible speaks of joy and peace in believing, and the scripture should be used to correct any error in our understanding about peace and joy. The first of the two obvious errors it corrects is the error of supposing that there is a way of joy and peace through the self. This is the broad road that leads to hell, but it is full of travellers. Some look for joy and peace absolutely through good works. Now, I can suppose that if you and I had never sinned, joy and peace would have been the consequence of perfect holiness. Adam in the garden must have had joy as the result of serving so good a Master, and he must have felt peace at nightfall. He could pray, "O God, I have kept Thy command, and I have not touched the forbidden fruit." Tragically, since Adam, you and I have broken God's laws in more ways than one, and any rational joy and peace are impossible under the covenant of works. For whatever may be the perfection of our future works, it can make no atonement for the past. You have spoiled the perfection of your obedience, and having ruined it, God cannot receive it at your hands. Do not try to get joy and peace by repentant feelings, by humbling yourself, by consecrating your life, or by any attempts of this kind. These things are good, pre-eminently good in themselves, if they are practised independently of your guilt and your wish to get on the right side of God. The peace and joy of your Salvation come only by the grace of Jesus.

The Holy Book also corrects another error which is so common, namely, turning the scripture upside down. There is such a thing as joy and peace in believing, and some infer that there is such a thing as believing in joy and peace. Such joy and peace are a snare of Satan. It should work the other way round. Now, joy and peace are the soul's flower, and if you get faith in the promise of Salvation and plant that into the ground, joy and peace will grow of it. But if you believe in joy and peace first, and because of that you say, "Now I believe," it is not believing; it is the very opposite of it. You must first trust and obey Jesus, and believe in His promise of Salvation, and peace and joy, the real nature of which we have no clue, will follow.

Having dealt with the errors the scripture exposes, let us, briefly, bring out the truth the scripture tells us.

The Bible tells us that believing in Christ is the true ground for joy and peace. What is believing in Christ? In one word, it is trusting Christ. He is sent of God to save sinners, and those sinners who trust in Him to save them are saved. Faith, then, which is the basis of our joy and peace, is a simple trust in Christ. We must trust enough of the Gospel to understand that God has devised a plan of Salvation. When we believe in His Salvation, we get rid of the anxiety about our inevitable mortality.

We trust in Jesus because of the wonderful union of His natures. He is God, and we know that whatever God undertakes, He can accomplish. But He is born as a man, and the knowledge that He is like ourselves, a man, lets us realise that He has the requisite tenderness to deal with such poor sinners as we

are, compassed about with our infirmities. We are prepared to rely upon Him because of His Godhead, which renders Him omnipotent. It seems to us that if we believe Jesus Christ to be God and man, it is not difficult to place ourselves in His incarnate hands.

Before I conclude, I want to give you ten reasons to be blessed with the joy and peace of Christ, because Jesus was born on Christmas Day:

We should rejoice and be at peace because God came down to earth and lived amongst us, allowing us to understand His true nature.

Rejoice and be at peace on His birth, because we now have the Gospel of truth to lead us through a perilous life.

Rejoice, because through His short but all-encompassing and powerful ministry of teaching, healing, guiding and speaking in parables, He has given us the grounds for our faith and trust in Him.

Rejoice, because He could resolutely walk towards the Cross, carrying the burden of our sins from soon after Creation, and nail it to the Cross, thus snatching us away from the evil hands of Satan, and releasing us from the curse of an eternal death.

Rejoice, because He could breathe His last on the Cross, and remove the hurdles that stood between man and God.

Rejoice, because on the third day of His death He could become our living God through His resurrection, defeating Satan, death and sin, and giving us hope of a new life in His new Creation.

Rejoice, because He ascended to heaven to prepare to receive us into His Kingdom, with the promise of His return that we could look forward to.

Rejoice, because Jesus could keep His promise of a Helper, by the outpouring of His indwelling Holy Spirit, to convict us and hold our hand through this life.

Rejoice, because Jesus could train His Apostles, who tell us how to live our earthly life through the wonderful Epistles.

Rejoice, because He could give John a glimpse of the end times, and give him the vision of what it is like when time and space are no more.

I close with the prayer that, by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, may all of us experience true joy and peace this Christmas, and all the days thereafter, till He reaches out to receive us into His Kingdom. Amen.