

Joy!

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

John 1:6-8, 19-28

Positive psychology is a reasonably new field of psychology – having only been introduced to the American Psychological Association in 1998 – and it is the study of how humans prosper in the face of adversity. One of the important pieces of research is the role of gratitude on resilience. A blog from the [Harvard Medical School](#) links a range of benefits shown by research to be linked to gratitude – improved physical and mental health, and better relationships, as two examples. The biblical injunction to rejoice now has empirical evidence to support why it is important.

Now, as a brief aside, rejoicing and gratitude most certainly do not mean that we cannot mourn or feel pain deeply. There is a very important difference between gratitude and pretending that everything is OK. This Christmas there will be people who find it a difficult time for a whole range of reasons and it is also important to give those who need it the space to name the pain in their lives. While focusing on the negatives has been shown to damage our physical and mental health, so too does the inability, whether this is within the self or from social pressures, to name the painful experiences that shape us... back to the main theme.

This week's Gospel reading was rather similar to the previous one. There are slight differences because this week we hear from John rather than Mark, but both are the story of John the Baptist in the Jordan calling people to repentance. This encourages us to explore this same story from a different point of view – what does it have to say about Joy?

In this Gospel, John the Baptist emphasises that he is not the one, but just the voice in the wilderness. The disciples of John the Baptist are still with us – the Mandaeans who worship in Aramaic trace their faith back to the proclamations of John the Baptist. It is probably for this reason the author of this Gospel is emphatic that John says: He confessed and did not deny it, but he confessed, "I am not the Messiah." The "I am not" of John the Baptist is then contrasted with Jesus' later "I am" sayings sprinkled through this Gospel.

It is the anticipation of what is to come that gives joy, the hope that this is not the end but a new beginning allows us to rejoice even when we do not see its fulfilment in the present. And what is it to be fulfilled?

According to the Gospel of Luke, when Jesus starts his ministry in chapter 4, he unrolls the scroll of Isaiah and reads part of today's reading:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

These words on their own are surely good news to both those who are oppressed and those who recognise the need for greater justice in the community. There is reason to rejoice, because the Messiah – the anointed one – is near and bringing

that good news into reality. Of course, for those who benefit from that oppression this is anything other than good news and there is little wonder the powers that be felt threatened enough by the message of Jesus to later execute him.

Our Isaiah reading invites us to reflect on this hopeful transformation of the social order that brings joy to those who have only experienced troubled times. This Gospel – as preached by both Jesus and Isaiah – is not simply about ticking the boxes on a particular morning whether this is at the temple, synagogue, or church, but an enlivened and active faith that brings joy to the people who most need to experience it.

However, it reminds us of a rather important point. Those of us who work for justice must do so in relationship with the people we seek to serve. We cannot simply get tied up in focusing on systems without also building that relationship. Without that relationship being at the forefront, we risk perpetuating injustice because we project our own needs and desires into the lives of other people. Throughout Advent we anticipate God being present in the world in a new way, building that relationship through shared experience, and being present in our daily experience of life.

The Jewish understanding of the Messiah can give us a lot of insight and challenge our preconceptions, so I would like to share here the work of [Rabbi Green](#) who in 1992 wrote:

Instead of bringing about the onset of redemption, messiah will herald its completion. The actual work of redeeming the world is turned to us in history, and is done by all of us, day by day. Messiah has been waiting in the wings, as it were, since the very beginning of history, ready to come forth when the time is right. According to one legend, he sits among the lepers at the gates of Rome—today we would be likely to find him in an AIDS hospice—tending to their wounds. Only when redemption is about to be completed will messiah be allowed to arrive. Rather than messiah redeeming us, we redeem messiah.

Where would we find the Messiah today? In the first Century the Messiah was not found in the halls of power, but rather walking the earth with ordinary people living under the oppression of Rome. The Messiah has not and will not be tamed by being in Cathedrals or church buildings. Rather when we go out into our communities and beyond, we might run into the Messiah at unexpected times and places. Where would we find the Messiah today? Buried under rubble in Gaza, freezing in Kyiv, in a remote Aboriginal community that has a shonky water supply, or sitting with a homeless family trying to get their life back together.

In this we can experience joy, because the present reality is not the end of the story, but rather, the present reality invites us to be present with the Messiah in a partnership to bring God's hope to the world.

We finish our reflection with our Psalm – the Magnificat – which, incidentally is also an option for the Psalm next week. Let us join in Mary's words of joy and reflect on what these words mean for us today.