

Reflection for Sunday 13th December: Advent 2: JOY (John 3:26-34)

A few years ago I set my kids a challenge. They could put anything edible on top of a pizza and I would eat it. It was a fun way to spend a day off, and I can tell you that what they came up with was pretty foul. I have to confess that of all the unpleasant mouthfuls the one with banana was the worst. For those you looking for useful life lessons from this reflection, here's one (and you can write this down): never put overripe banana on top of a pizza.

It's the 3rd Sunday of Advent today and depending on which set of themes you use, **it's the week of JOY, and the week of John the Baptist**. This year, we're kind of harmonising the two – so in week 1 we saw the HOPE promised by Jesus' family tree, and last week the PEACE promised by the prophets. Next week, it's fairly straightforward to link LOVE with Jesus' mother Mary.

But this is the most challenging week. Think of John the Baptist, and the word 'Joy' is not the first word that comes to mind. If you've ever played the dinner party game – who you'd most like to have as your guests – the Baptist rarely ever gets mentioned. It could be a wild guess but it might be the camel hair clothing, or maybe the requirement to put wild locusts on your dinner party menu. Perhaps John would be a better guest on 'I'm a celebrity, get me out of here...'

Although on second thoughts, perhaps not. Imagine the first round of introductions with Ant and Dec, and then John strikes up: 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?' (Luke 3:7)

So, of John's many qualities – and don't forget he is the first person mentioned in the bible to be filled with the Holy Spirit from birth – joy is not usually taken to be one of them. Like banana on a pizza, the two, you might think, just don't mix.

But, as it happens, you'd be wrong. There is a wonderful passage right in the heart of John's gospel chapter 3 – one of the most famous chapters of the bible, though most of us only read the first half of it – where John talks very openly about joy. This is our reading for today, and in it John describes that he is full of joy, indeed that his joy is complete.

Where does this joy come from? From one very simple source – hearing Jesus' voice. **When John looks at Jesus, he finds joy.**

And this is really what I want to say to all of us today. There are a lot of reasons not to be happy at the moment. I don't need to name them, you know what they are. And if you're anything like me, it's difficult not to think about them. And the more we do, the more down we feel. That is the reality of life in Britain in December 2020 – and we might as well be honest about that.

But joy is deeper than happiness. A few months ago we looked at the difference between the two, and we noted that our external circumstances are not the whole story. Happiness is something that happens to us, but **joy goes deeper**, it can co-exist with other emotions like sadness and anger. And while happiness comes and goes, joy can be permanent, a long-term gift to us.

Deep down, joy is about having the confidence that, one way or another, everything will be alright. Joy is about gratitude for the things we can celebrate even in the gloom. And ultimately, joy is found in a person.

When John looks at Jesus he finds joy. And that is our hope, too. The reason we give a week to focus on joy at Advent is that it reminds us that the source of our joy is Jesus: that baby in the manger who represents God's coming into the world. God does not leave us on our own. God enters our world. God brings hope and opportunity, God offers peace and purpose. God comes to us. And as God comes, so we can know joy.

And Jesus is not just the source of this joy, but empowers it, too. As John says at the end of our passage, Jesus gives the Spirit without limit. His reserves of joy are never exhausted. There is always enough to go round. It is one of his gifts to us.

As I close: the news is likely to be depressing for the foreseeable future. News always is. But that is not the final answer. Joy has come too, and longs to make its home in our hearts. *Look again at the face of Jesus, for there we will find deep and eternal joy. Amen.*