

Advent 3 2018

'Rejoice! ... Do not fear! ... God will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love, he will exult over you with loud singing!' Today is traditionally called Gaudete Sunday – Gaudete being the Latin word for rejoice. We aren't yet at the moment of birth, but we are in sight of it. Something exciting and good is just around the corner, only a little more patience – only a few more sleeps – and we will be there. Something wonderful is hovering just out of reach, beckoning us forward in delight and celebration.

Sometimes I think that, like John the Baptist, I may have missed the memo about this. There he is calling us all a brood of vipers and here I am worrying about all there is left to do before Christmas hits. Presents to wrap, food to buy, services to lead, worlds to change, repentance to find – it's a lot. Paul in his letter to the Philippians echoes Zephaniah's call to rejoice, telling us not to worry about anything because God is near. But John the Baptist and I are busily doing the opposite and worrying about everything we can!

I wonder whether you more naturally find yourself on team Zephaniah or team John the Baptist? Whether you find it easier to picture God as one who is on our side, picture God, as one person beautifully said to me this week, as the one who has our back? Or whether your image of God is more judgey, more inclined to tell us where we're going wrong than to exult over us with loud singing?

It's taken me a while to get from a judgey God to a rejoicing God and I'm going to share with you one of the moments that made that transition possible. It was quite a while ago now, a few years after I was ordained when I was working as a college chaplain in Cambridge University. I was given a spiritual exercise to do by my spiritual director. It was a very simple one. Picture yourself sitting somewhere you feel safe and relaxed. As you sit there picture Jesus coming to be with you. What does he say to you? What do you say to him?

Now I didn't feel I was doing a great job as a chaplain – or as a priest or as a human being. So I was nervous about what this exercise would reveal. I expected Jesus to come to me, to look at me with loving but disappointed eyes. To say something like, Ellen, Of course I love you, but it's time to pull your socks up and make a better job of your life. But that wasn't what happened. Instead Jesus came to me with eyes full of love, nothing else – not a shade of disappointment or judgement. Instead of speaking he reached out his hand and took mine and we danced together. And as we danced he reached out his other hand and it wasn't just us dancing it was everyone, all of us dancing with God.

'Rejoice! ... Do not fear! ... God will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love, he will exult over you with loud singing!' That spiritual experience made me fall in love with God all over again. Of course it didn't mean that I stopped worrying or seeing what is wrong in the world. In fact it gave me more energy to work for change. If we start not from a point of fear, of a sense of inadequacy and failure, but from a point of hope, of a sense of love and validation there is so much more we can do!

There is a prayer poem by Michael Leunig that Alan Jones and I both share as one of our go to pieces of theology. It's this one:

There are only two feelings. Love and fear.
There are only two languages. Love and fear.
There are only two activities. Love and fear.
There are only two motives, two procedures,
two frameworks, two results. Love and fear.
Love and fear.

Everything in God, everything in Advent, is calling us to the first of these – to love rather than to fear. Advent is calling to us that God loves us so much that at Christmas she's coming to make her home with us, and that at the end of all things she's coming to take us home with her. God delights in you. God wants to be with you. God stretches out a hand to hold yours and whirl you into the dance of love.

This is a deep and gentle truth that is stronger than the strident voices telling us how undeserving of love we are. Sometimes these voices are loudest at Christmas when we spend time with family who may not love us as they should. Are voices at your family table trying to tell you that you are not good enough? Refuse to let them drown out the quiet voice of God whispering again and again 'I rejoice over you'.

And let's not leave John the Baptist out of the party. If you get beyond the brood of vipers language to what he actually advises people to do there is a real gentleness there too. He doesn't ask people to uproot their lives or give up their professions, he simply invites them to act in just and gentle ways within the paths they are already walking. Tax-gatherers are to be honest, soldiers to be just and careful. All he says is that we are to live considerate lives in which the needs of others are given equal weight with our own. To let love rather than fear direct our actions.

Imagine if that is how we lived as a nation. It would be inconceivable that we would allow a 7 year old refugee child to die of dehydration and exhaustion when in our care. We would not be governed by our fear of the other but by our love for them. We would take the risk of holding our arms open to the weary and the victimized and we would rejoice with them as God rejoices with us. We would see in them the God who was born of poor parents in a sketchy barn in an occupied country and became a refugee child himself.

And in the midst of all the ways we fall short God still offers to renew us with his love. God still rejoices in us. Sometimes I'm not sure why but that's God for you – profligate with his love and delighted to share it with us even when we're going wrong. So I'm going to close with a favourite poem that speaks to that moment when we truly know that God loves us without condition and rejoices over us. That moment when we truly know that God exults over us with loud singing. It's Everyone Sang by Siegfried Sassoon:

Everyone suddenly burst out singing;
And I was filled with such delight
As prisoned birds must find in freedom,
Winging wildly across the white
Orchards and dark-green fields; on - on - and out of sight.

Everyone's voice was suddenly lifted;
And beauty came like the setting sun:
My heart was shaken with tears; and horror
Drifted away ... O, but Everyone
Was a bird; and the song was wordless; the singing will never be done.

