

Advent 1, Sunday 29th November
Wesley Ebenezer Pastoral letter

“Joy to the World!”

Dear sisters and brothers,

I got up this morning with a heavy heart. No particular reason, except that we're in the middle of a world pandemic and almost all the news seems to be bad. I opened the bedroom window blind and “WOW!”, suddenly there was the city spread out across the hills in front of me. The rising sun behind me shone a brilliant golden light from hundreds of windows back into my face. It only lasted for about 30 seconds. Into my head came part of a song:

“The sun comes up, it's a new day dawning,
It's time to sing Your song again.
Whatever may pass and whatever lies before me,
Let me be singing when the evening comes.

*Bless the Lord, O my soul,
Worship His holy name,
Sing like never before, O my soul,
I'll worship your holy name.”*

Suddenly, I remembered standing in the middle of Cheltenham racecourse, singing with thousands of people at the “Greenbelt” Christian festival. It was a communal outdoor celebration of Holy Communion. Matt Redman, the worship leader and songwriter, had been telling us about the dark times he and his family had been going through. It seemed as if God had turned his face away from them. He couldn't write or sing.

Then GOD spoke to him through Psalm 103 and he wrote this song. It's often called “Ten thousand reasons” because he suddenly realised that he actually had 10,000 reasons to bless and thank the Lord.

The other two verses are:

*“You're rich in love and You're slow to anger,
Your name is great and Your heart is kind.
For all your goodness, I will keep on singing;
Ten thousand reasons for my heart to find.*

*And on that day when my strength is failing,
The end draws near and my time has come,
Still my soul will sing You praise unending:
Ten thousand years and then forever more!”*

(Songs of Fellowship, no 2231. Jonas Myrin and Matt Redman)

I would recommend reading Psalm 103 in your own Bible this week and maybe counting your own blessings. These are depressing, upsetting and sometimes worrying times. But our Methodist year begins this Sunday with the Advent season of Joy. We celebrate the joy that God felt when he created our Universe. The Bible tells us that as God created the world, each day he rested after the work and he saw that it was good. He built the world

and blessed it. He built it for a purpose, so that the whole of creation would work together. So that animals and plants were interdependent and we humans would also take care of our planet. God clearly took time to walk in loving relationship with Adam and Eve at the end of every new day in the Garden of Eden, because they hid from him after they tasted the forbidden apple. That was the beginning of the long journey of God's people, told in the Old Testament.

How fortunate are we, to be alive in these times, knowing Jesus as our Lord and Saviour!
How fortunate are we to be alive in these times, knowing the Holy Spirit as our Helper!

Let's pray together:

*Lord Jesus Christ,
We remember with joy how You brought hope as you loved the poor,
healed the sick and the broken hearted.
You brought joy in the place of sorrow, light into darkness
And new beginnings in what had seemed like the end.
Hear now our prayer for people who are in despair;
People for whom the future seems bleak, happiness a distant memory.
Lord, hear our prayer for those who are grieving for loved ones or who are struggling with
illness, or separated from loved ones.
Lord, reach out in love and give them strength, hope and comfort.*

*Lord, hear our prayer for those who struggle with injustice, oppression, poverty.
To our shame, we know that too many children go hungry to school.
Too many innocent people are wrongfully imprisoned across the world, including
in detention centres in our own country. Too many are homeless.
Lord bring hope and the joy of your salvation to your world today!
Show us what we can do to make a difference in our world now.
In the name of Jesus we pray, Amen.*

So let's be Advent people and try to remember the 10,000 reasons why we should be glad and joyful! I'll try to take my own advice! Enjoy rainbows and remember their promise! Enjoy the presence of God with you in your special prayer time. Know that you can always call on Him in times of trouble because He is there beside you. Some people call these desperate prayers "Arrow prayers!" There's no need for formality. God is already beside you and knows your trouble. (I know you know this already, but sometimes we need encouraging, like I did this morning!")

May the Lord bless you and keep you, may He make his face to smile upon you and give you His peace, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.

Sue Stanworth, local preacher.

PS. Do let me know if you'd like to talk.

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