**Sermon 22nd December, 2024**

**“Joy to the world** – the Lord has come” is one of the hymns we will enjoy singing this morning. And we will mean it – but at the same time realise that there is a tension in singing it. I think nearly all of us have reasons to feel some sadness and disappointment this Christmas 2024. We all are concerned about the future, we feel for those caught in wars overseas, or those in nearby Vanuatu suffering from the effects of this last week’s earthquakes. Here in Eden I know many are worried about all the uncertainty around the future of the timber industry, and that is greatly affecting our son and his family. Most of us have some health or family issues that we would like to see improved.

But still as followers of Jesus, we have joy, that is deep within us.

That same God given joy is reflected in Mary’s song that we heard this morning. It is of course partly a remembrance from the Psalms and from the book of Samuel and other scriptures that Mary would have learned to recite as a child. But also, she would have been inspired by the Holy Spirit to praise and rejoice in God’s mercy and love, just as Elizabeth was.

The Common English translation of the opening lines is “With all my heart I glorify the Lord! In the depths of who I am, I rejoice in God my saviour”.

Sometimes we might wonder if we have a spirit of rejoicing in us; or what are our real depths of being?

The other day I met with friends who told me about a sea eagle landing close to them while they were fishing. I think to get their bait. There was real joy in that experience and the telling of it to me; for them.

The other morning when driving into Merimbula, I was deeply touched to see two male lyre birds dancing on the side of the road. Or the sight of the full moon rising above the sea might move us to rejoice in that way.

But then we might get even more of an inkling, when we are surprised and touched by the smile of a baby ( my niece’s 11 month old the other day) , or the kindness of a stranger or the grace of a forgiving spirit. These are of course ultimately gifts from God.

No wonder then that Mary felt so blessed and affirmed in her very depths when her cousin Elizabeth confirmed her growing sense of excitement! (also mixed with some apprehension as well.).

Julia Baird, the Australian journalist recently wrote a book about grace.

 “Bright shining; how grace changes everything” In it she discusses the way her mother a prison visitor in Sydney with the Christian organisation Kairos, was the epitome of grace.

She speculates on whether she inherited some of that grace by discussing some of the recent research on foetal microchimerism, which is a biological process whereby often cells from an unborn baby pass to the mother and sometimes stay for many years if not life. This is most noticed in the case of male dna being detected in mothers. It would be interesting to know more about this, but as an aside, I wonder whether Mary’s excitement and rejoicing included a physical molecular change in her as well as a deep spiritual part of her very depths of being. There are many things we don’t know. But there are also many that we do.

A thoughtful priest wrote:-

“We can be sure that God only wants what is good for us, wants us to use our God-given gifts to grow into wise, loving and generous human beings who will make valuable contributions to the good of others and to our world”

And as Christians we know that the baby whose arrival we celebrate this week, was the one who grew up to show us the way and the truth of God’s love for humanity by treating all he encountered in respectful ways, particularly the poor, the sick, the downtrodden. He urged us all to relate to others in ways that mirrored him. ( W

The painting by Grace Kumbi, an artist from the Daly River area of the NT that we see on the screen, is titled “Three hunters.” It resonates with me as its colours and its imagery are bright and full of rejoicing. The camp fire is cheerful. The star in the heavens is bright and focussed on the father and mother and baby. In their humble shelter and closeness to the earth they reflect the words of Mary’s song. The first visitors to see the baby are traditional hunters. They are humble workers too - **but** the very earth they tread on sparkles with the reflected love of the holy family and God the father.

Last week , we sang the song “Oh come , oh come Immanuel”

This week in the last lines of “Oh little town of Bethlehem”, we sing

“Oh come to us , abide with us our Lord Immanuel”

The name Jesus or Joshua means saviour.

Centuries before his birth Isaiah (7;14) prophesied that a son would be born named “Immanuel”.

Immanuel is a nickname or alternative name for Jesus, and means “God is with us”

That knowledge and certainty is the source of our joy. In all our disappointments, cares and worries for our families, our communities, our world.,

we know that “God is with us” God does not want us to be alone in all our problems and various situations. God wants to be our Immanuel – “God is with us”