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**Keeping God at the centre of our lives**

**this Christmas Season.**

**Reflections for Advent 2017**

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**Advent and Hope**

Hope is allowing the confidence that what God has said He will do, He will do to shape our emotions and our attitudes. It is, if you like, faith working its way into the present from the future just as faith is the evidence of current hope. One of the greatest lacks in the world around us today is the lack of hope. Hopelessness is a blight on the human spirit. It crushes the hungry, destroys the poor and eats away at the strength of the oppressed. It is one of the devil’s greatest weapons. We conquer hopelessness with the power of God at work in our lives. The hope God has given us can be shared, it can be seen and it can be sensed. That hope is rooted in the promises of the Old Testament prophets and was birthed in the person and work of Jesus Christ. It is as strong today as it has ever been and is available to all who will look to Christ. This week, perhaps we can pray for those people and places around the world where hope is being strangled by fear and oppression and where longing has grown faint because of the constant barrage of pain, hunger or tragedy.

Amidst the hustle and the bustle of the approach to Christmas, I pray that these little devotional thoughts will help you to realise how close God is to you, and how much He loves you. May you be able to find a few moments of stillness each day and have the opportunity to connect with the God Who is always there, always loves you and always longs to draw you into a deeper experience of His love and grace.

May Christmas be more real in your heart and life this year than ever before.

Grace and Peace,

Malcolm Duncan

Buckinghamshire

**November 2017**

***Sunday 3rd December***

***Did you know that Advent is about longing?***

*“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined.”*

**Isaiah 9:2**

All human beings have a deep sense of longing but it is what we long for that defines us. Some people yearn for money, sex and power. They are never content with what they have, and are always yearning for more. Interestingly, such people are never content. Others want nothing more than to be in the limelight. They want the world to look at them and to declare how great they are. Yet behind all of these longings, there is a common deeper longing. It is buried deep within all people. We long for hope. We want something to live for. We are desperate to know the meaning of our existence, the reason for being here.

The people of the Southern Kingdom of Judah, around 750 years before the birth of Jesus, were desperate to know that God had not forsaken them. The Northern Kingdom of Israel were facing an increased threat from the mighty Assyrian Empire around this time and would eventually be taken into captivity by them in 722 B.C., never to emerge again. Imagine the power of the hope in these verses to the people of the Southern Kingdom of Judah! Despite what they were seeing, despite political uncertainty, military aggression and economic collapse, God had not abandoned them. Hope was not dead because God was not absent.

Perhaps today, we too face great uncertainty. We are not sure what tomorrow will bring. But this Advent season, may God bring us a sense of hope. He is the Answer to our deepest longings. We do not need more stuff. We do not need more money, more power or more kudos. Instead, may we remember that we have all we need in Christ.

***Monday 4th December***

***Did you know that we live between two great moments?***

*“They said, ‘Men of Galilee, who do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”*

**Acts 1:11**

Advent reminds us that we live between two great moments in the history of the world and in the purposes of God. The first is when Jesus Christ came as a baby, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. This first arrival of Jesus was unnoticed by most people. The powerful, the strong, the religious and the proud missed it. The Son of God had come to the earth, however, to seek and to safe that which was lost. During his earthly ministry, Christ lived a sinless life, died an atoning death, was buried and rose again. He defeated sin on the cross and paid the debt for our sin, taking upon Himself our punishment for sin. He defeated death through the resurrection and proved that He was the Mighty Victor. The very thing we feared most was made subject to the Saviour of the world.

Just before His death, Jesus promised His disciples that He was going to the Father and that He would one day return for His people. So forty days after His crucifixion when the Lord Jesus ascended back to heaven, the angels reminded the disciples that the same Jesus who was leaving would one day return. They said He would return as the same Saviour in the same way. This is the second great moment of history.

We live between these two moments. We live in the light of Christ’s first coming and awaiting the promise of His Second Coming. Although it has not yet happened, it is as sure as the words on this page. Christ will come again! And when He does, He will consummate the Kingdom that He inaugurated in His first advent. We are the people of hope! We are redeemed because of His first coming and we live with anticipation of His return, when all things will be made new.

***Tuesday 5th December***

***Did you know that our hope is rooted in historical reality of the resurrection?***

*“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead…”*

**1 Peter 1:3**

Christian hope is not grounded in some kind of fairy-tale. We don’t stumble about in the dark hoping that it will all work out in the end. We have a sure and certain hope which is grounded in the reality that around about 30 A.D. on the outskirts of Jerusalem Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Mary and step-son of Joseph the Carpenter, rose from the dead. His tomb was only a temporary resting place for his remains. Three days after the Romans had murdered Him by crucifixion, He rose from the dead.

The Apostle Paul made it clear that this was the very heart of the Gospel. He urged the Corinthians Christians to remember that this truth sat at the very centre of what it meant to believe in Jesus. Paul actually argued that if Christ had not been raised from the dead then Christians were to be pitied: but Christ is raised from the dead and therefore we are people of hope! The Apostle Peter, writing to a group of Christians around 64 A.D. who were facing rising persecution and opposition, reminded them that the core of their hope lay in the reality of the resurrection.

Don’t forget the power of the resurrection today. Around the world, our brothers and sisters face a great deal of uncertainty. In many parts of the world Christians live in terrible conditions facing the most uncertain of circumstances. But the power of resurrection hope is greater than anything else. The same power that raised Christ from the dead lives in all those who are Christians. There is nothing in the world that is stronger than this hope!

***Wednesday 6th December***

***Did you know that our hope is invested in the inheritance of Heaven?***

*“…and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you…”*

**1 Peter 1:4**

It has become rather popular to talk of Heaven as ‘another dimension’. By this, we mean that Heaven is a constant reality that exists alongside the reality of the world as we see it and experience it. This is, of course, true. Heaven breaks into the world through miracles, through the present power of the Holy Spirit. Heaven is the rule and the reign of Almighty God, the principles of His Kingdom which are evidenced in the earthly ministry and heavenly reign of the Lord Jesus Christ. Whilst this is true, and fills us with great hope, Heaven is more than this.

Where is the Lord Jesus now? He still has a body. He is present somewhere, praying for His people, standing before His Father. He has promised that He will return from where He is so that we can be with Him. Indeed, one day Heaven will come to earth and the whole of the world will be transformed. There will be no more suffering, no more tears, no more sin and no more death. This is a powerful source of hope for Christians. We do not sorrow as others without hope!

This powerful promise of Heavenly hope will not wear out or rot because it is imperishable! It will not become tainted or infected because it is undefiled. It will not loose its allure and attractiveness because it is unfading. The passing of time should not eradicate the power of Heavenly hope. One day God will make all things new! We live, with hope, for that day.

***Thursday 7th December***

***Did you know that God wins?***

*“who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.”*

**1 Peter 1:5**

We are not locked in a battle that is uncertain. So often, the language of Christians can make it sound like the outcome of history could go one way or another. The way we talk you would sometimes think that Christ’s victory on the cross was somehow only partial. That is not true! The cross, the empty tomb and the promise of the return of the Lord Jesus are all linked. Christ secured our forgiveness and our deliverance from sin on the cross; He secured our victory over death through His resurrection; and He will bring all things to a climactic conclusion when He returns. There is no uncertainty about this. There are no ifs, buts or maybes in these promises.

On Christmas Eve 2015 someone I had grown to love died. She battled bravely against breast cancer. She left behind a beautiful family and a loving husband. She ad her husband had two birth children who were only 9 and 7 years old respectively when she died. They also had three adult children who were 21, 19 and 18 respectively when she died. Their first mum had also died of breast cancer when they were young – in fact two of them were the same age as the two youngest children this time. I had the privilege of preaching at her funeral and thanksgiving service. The title of my sermon was simply ‘God wins’.

When my friend died, she left the land of dying and entered the land of the living. Death did not win. Cancer did not win. Sin did not win. Her salvation is now complete. She is more fully alive than she has ever been. She is more fully herself than she ever was. She is complete, truly released and free. Nothing can change who she now is. This is the great hope of every Christian. God wins! God always wins in the lives of Christians because God always has the last word.

***Friday 8th December***

***Did you know that hope has nothing to do with circumstances?***

*“In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith - being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.”*

**1 Peter 1:6-7**

So often we can allow ourselves to think that our hope is dependent upon our circumstances. That’s just not the case. We think that if we are healthier we will be happier. If we are wealthier we will be more content. If we have a better job we will be more secure. None of these things are true. The circumstances of our lives do not dictate the well-being of our souls. The well-being of our spiritual lives is utterly dependent upon what God has done for us in Christ. We are complete in Him. We are secure in Him. We are given new life in Him. We have hope in Him.

Richard Wurmbrand was a Romanian pastor who was imprisoned for his faith and tortured and beaten. He endured terrible hardships and suffering. Yet in his book *Tortured for Christ* he speaks of being alone, hungry and naked in his cell yet dancing for joy! When Paul and Silas were in jail in Philippi, they sang hymns of praise to God. Our circumstances do not dictate our hope. Peter reminds his listeners of the same truth. They face great uncertainty as persecution rises around them, but their hope is unshakeable because it is not based on their surroundings, it is based on their Saviour. In the last couple of years I have just visited several of the most dangerous countries in the world for Christians. I have met the most remarkable people – whose hope is strong and whose lives are full of the presence of the Lord. Yet Christian hope remains strong. Strong enough to give those who are Christians courage. Strong enough to mean that we who are Christians reach out to help, love, support and serve those who are devastated by the circumstances of life. We make a difference in the lives of others because we are the people of hope.

***Saturday 9th December***

***Did you know that hope and joy are chained together by faith?***

*“Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.”*

**1 Peter 1:8-9**

Hope looks like something; it is chained to joy and leads to courage, determination, peace and love. The link between hope and all of these things is faith. Peter makes it clear that the Christians to whom he is writing have not seen Jesus in the past and that they cannot physically seem Him now. Yet they love Him and believe in Him and they trust Him. They have faith in Him and this faith in Him is released a powerful set of virtues in their lives – courage, confidence, hope and joy. What is true of them is also true of us.

Imagine a set of keys for a moment. There is one key ring fob with the word hope written on it. It is connected to a large key ring, from which hang various keys. One key is love, one key is courage, one key is determination and so forth. The ring that holds all of these keys is the ring of faith. Without faith, hope is just a detached idea. It doesn’t root itself in anything. Hope that is not rooted in anything is just blind optimism. It is useless. Hope that is chained to faith, however, holds all the keys of the Christian life together in one place.

Faith comes to us from God. It is a gift. We cannot purchase this key ring! We cannot manufacture it. God gives it to us. The key ring is strengthened as we listen to and live in the word of God. The more we use the gifts of Gods word, God’s Spirit and God’s presence in our lives, the stronger the key ring becomes; and the stronger the key ring, the more confident we are of the security of our joy, our determination and our hope!

**Advent and Peace**

All around the world today there is an absence of peace. This can be seen in the war-torn areas of the Middle East and the devastation of conflict in Sub-Saharan Africa. It can also be seen in the political uncertainty and turmoil of the United States of America and the United Kingdom as the implications of leaving the European Union are worked out. The lack of peace is also seen in families that are divided, churches and denominations that have split and in the deep uncertainties that many individuals face about their own lives and futures. This week we explore the beautiful gift of Christian peace and its power to bring stillness to troubled hearts and lives. The promise of peace is echoed in the cry of John the Baptist, Jesus’ cousin, who pointed to Christ and declared, ‘Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.’ Peace comes from knowing Christ and being known by Him. This week, perhaps we can remember those people and places around the world where peace is nothing other than a longing and where conflict is the daily reality.

***Sunday 10th December***

***Did you know that peace is more than the absence of conflict?***

*“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”*

**Philippians 4:7**

Christian peace is not simply the absence of turmoil and trouble, although it is certainly that. To get to the heart of the idea of Christian peace, we need to consider the Jewish idea of Shalom. Shalom is the utter wellbeing of the human person. Shalom is the reality that the body, mind and spirit are at rest and content. Jewish theology teaches that the power and the presence of shalom drive out the lesser powers of uncertainty and any sense of not being at peace. For Christians the idea of shalom is the heartbeat of peace. We are not simply at peace because we are not at war. We are at peace because something stronger than war has taken up residence in our lives. We do not strive to attain peace, we live from a place of peace. When Paul wrote to the Christians in Philippi, he as writing to a group of people where peace was sorely needed. Unsettling false teaching was impacting the Christians at Philippi. In addition, two women who had become sources of division and conflict in the Church were having a negative impact on the Church. Paul himself was probably writing to them from jail and they were no doubt worried about him. In the midst of all of these circumstances he tells them that God’s peace will guard their hearts and minds.

Christian peace impacts our emotions and our wills. The Jewish idea of the heart is not about your emotions but about your intentions and choices. The Jewish idea of the mind is about your emotions and your understanding. So Paul urges the Christians at Philippi to remember that God’s Shalom is a tangible and experienced reality that impacts the decisions that we make and the way we view the world. We engage with life from a place of peace, not from a place of fear and from a place of trust rather than a place of uncertainty.

***Monday 11th December***

***Did you know that Christ is our peace?***

*“For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.”*

**Ephesians 2:14**

The problem at Ephesus was that the Jewish followers of Jesus and the Gentile followers of Jesus were suspicious of one another. This mutual suspicion was causing mutual hostility. Paul addresses the issue by reminding both groups that in Jesus Christ their divisions have been removed and they are now one people. Christ has become their peace. He does not offer them peace so much as He is their peace. When they have Christ, they have peace. The choice that they have to make is whether or not they will allow what Christ has done for them to become what Christ is doing in them. Jesus has removed their hostility toward one another by removing the barriers between them and God. The removal of the barrier of sin between them and God means that the barriers between one another are also removed.

This Advent, it is important to remember that Christ is our peace. Peace with God is not something that we can create or sustain. Peace with God is a gift that has been given to us through what Jesus Chris has done for us. He has removed the barriers. The Cross takes away the vertical break in the relationship between God and us. This vertical restoration has horizontal implications, however. It has an impact on the way that we view other people. Those who share our faith are now our brothers and sisters and therefore we are family. The world around us has been impacted by what Jesus has done. Creation itself is being brought back into a place of peace and healing with God.

Peace is not something you and I strive for, it is something that we have been given in Christ. Let the peace that we have been given in Jesus flow through us to one another.

***Tuesday 12th December***

***Did you know that peace is a promise for the whole world, not just for you?***

*“He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.”*

**Isaiah 2:4**

We must be careful not to turn the peace of God into a pious idea that is for us and us only. The promise of God’s peace from the Scriptures results in much more than our own sense of shalom. Whilst not under-estimating this beautiful gift, we should remember the bigger picture of God’s peace in the world.

One day, when Christ returns, the wars and the dissensions that have decimated the world will end. This can be hard for us to believe as we look around the world today. The Institute for Economics and Peace examines the state of peace in 162 countries around the world and it estimates 151 of them are in conflict! Since 2007 this sense of conflict has been increasing year on year. Christians are working in many of these countries and trying to help and support those who are the victims of conflict.

As Christians, we need to hold onto the promise that God’s peace will one day cover the whole world. It can be hard to remember that, but nevertheless it is vitally important. This Advent, as we share gifts with one another, each one is a small symbol of God’s interest in the life of every one of us. We care because He cares. We give because He has given to us. We not only give but we also pray. We pray that where there is conflict, human hearts will be softened and peace will be chosen. God’s peace is offered to all, but not everyone accepts it.

***Wednesday 13th December***

***Did you know that our peace flows from who Christ’s personhood, not our perspective?***

*“For a child has been born for us, a son given to us’ authority rests on his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”*

**Isaiah 9:6**

We serve the Prince of Peace. God is not the author of war and hatred and division. Instead, He is the author of peace. It is challenged for us to think that human beings choose conflict and war over harmony and peace, but it is true. Religion has caused so much hatred, division and violence over the years. As Christians, we need to recognise our own bloody contribution to violence over the years and ask God to forgive us and help us not to do the same things again. Yet as we look around the world today, we see violence pouring out of Islamic Fundamentalism in many countries across the Middle East and Africa. Fundamentalism of any sort leads to violence and should be rejected. The fundamentalism of North Korea is as bad as the fundamentalism of ISIS and Boko Haram. The fundamentalism of white Christian extremism is as wrong as any other.

Christianity worships the Prince of Peace, however. Isaiah’s beautiful description of the Saviour reminds us of that.

One way in which we can remember the importance of following the Prince of Peace is by asking God to give us His perspective on both the situations we face in our own lives and in the situations we hear about and see in the wider world. So often we jump to the wrong conclusions. We can make judgments that are superficial and by doing so make a problem even more difficult. Instead of making our own judgments today, let’s ask God to help us to see the world through His eyes. Perhaps then we can become peacemakers?

***Thursday 14th December***

***Did you know that we are to be peacemakers in our troubled world?***

*“And work for the peace and prosperity of the city where I sent you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, for its welfare will determine your welfare.”*

**Jeremiah 29:7 (New Living Translation)**

You and I can be people who carry peace wherever we are and wherever we go. It is amazing to think that our words, our actions and our decisions can contribute to the peace and wellbeing of a community. When God spoke through Jeremiah and reminded the people of Judah that they were to see the peace of the city, it was at a time when they were being taken into a terrible period of captivity. They would be forced into Babylon, which is modern day Iraq, for 70 years. They would be far away from their homes, their temple and their culture. All around them would be uncertainty. They were to be a community under siege politically, but spiritually they were to be a blessing and peacemakers.

Jesus told us we were to be peacemakers. Our role in the world is to be a community of peace; a community that welcomes the broken, the conflicted and the hurt. This Advent, may God use our lives, our homes, our churches and our resources to further peace. May our words be peaceful words and our attitudes be laden with peace. We may find ourselves in a culture that is unfamiliar. We may feel like we are under siege. All around us we might look at the devaluing of Christian faith yet God still calls us to be peacemakers. His presence in us can bring peace in a troubled world. Perhaps our homes feel like that, or maybe our communities do. It might even be that our nation feels like it is in conflict. Wherever we are and whatever we face, may God give us peace where we are troubled and may He make us peacemakers in a troubled world.

***Friday 15th December***

***Did you know that peace is not always possible in a fallen world?***

*“If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”*

**Romans 12:18**

Living at peace is not always possible. No matter how hard you try, you cannot make someone grasp the hand of peace that is offered. All around the world today there are families that are broken because someone finds it hard to make peace with someone else. There are communities that are divided because one side has put its rights about the rights of the other side. Countries are in conflict because one side is demanding more than another side can give. Of course, there are also situations where peace is not possible because evil has to be confronted. We must be careful not to allow the Christian commitment to peace to become a license for oppression and injustice.

Paul urges the Roman Christians, in a city where being a Christian was dangerous and difficult choice to live at peace with all people as much as it depended on them. What did he mean? I think he meant that Christians should never be the initiator of conflict and aggression. We must not continue division for the sake of division. I also think he meant that they must learn to live out the principles of their faith courageously and honourably. They should be faithful to Christ. Others might persecute them for this. Christians do not have any control over how other people react to us, but we do have control over how we react to others.

We must not dilute who we are. Sometimes this will lead to conflict and we cannot avoid that. We must not be less than we are. Sometimes that means we must choose the way of peace rather than the way of conflict. Sometimes we must step up to who we are. This means we become peacemakers in troubled contexts. Sometimes, however, we will face trouble, difficulty and conflict because of who we are. In such situations, we must keep our hearts and minds set of Christ. As much as it depends on us, we live in peace with all people.

***Saturday 16th December***

***Did you know that peace flows from the Gospel and from grace?***

*“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours.”*

**Luke 2:14**

One of the hardest things for us to realise as human beings is just how selfish and hurtful we can be. When the chips are down, we do what is best for us, not what is best for other people. No-one needs to teach a toddler how to throw a tantrum, it comes quite naturally! No-one sets out on their wedding day to be unfaithful to their spouse, but it happens. Families fracture and communities come apart because they are made up of flawed and broken people like you and like me. We are all broken.

Advent is traditionally a time of year when we look back to the birth of Christ and forward to the Second Coming of Christ; but it is also a time when we reflect on our own brokenness and sinfulness. We acknowledge our need of a Saviour and the ways in which our own lives have hurt others. The season of Advent is actually the beginning of the year for the Christian calendar. The reason for that is that all of our lives now revolve around Christ – His birth, life, death, resurrection and return.

Peace begins with a right relationship with God. Peace becomes possible when we acknowledge our need of God’s kindness and mercy and we are honest about our own short-comings and failures. Peace is possible when we are willing to turn toward God and let Him transform us. The Bible describes this about turn as repentance and the Greek word literally means to stop, turn and walk back in the opposite direction. The first coming of Christ brought the possibility of peace to all people. The only requirement from us is that we acknowledge our constant need of the Saviour. He is ready to give us peace as a gift, but whether are ready to accept it or not is up to us.

**Advent and Joy**

As we journey into the third week of Advent we turn our attention to joy. Christian joy includes, but is not restricted to, happiness. It is a much deeper reality than much of what the world around us describes as joy. The kind of joy that the world often thinks of when it uses the word is like the grin on the face of the Cheshire Cat in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*. Christian joy has a deeper source and a more profound reality than that. Ultimately, joy comes from being at the centre of God’s will and letting God’s will be at the centre of our lives. Just as the Virgin Mary came to understand, the greatest doorway into joy is to abandon our own agendas for God’s agenda. Only then can we say, ‘My Spirit rejoices in God my Saviour’. Perhaps this week we can take time to remember those people whose joy has been stolen because they have no purpose to their lives or because they are so busy trying to survive that they do not feel like they have time to truly live.

***Sunday 17th December***

***Did you know that Christ’s coming brings joy?***

*“But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”*

**Luke 2:10**

The world without Christ is a scary place. It may be full of beauty and wonder and opportunity, but it is also scary. It is uncertain, it is cruel and it is harsh. No-one knew that more than the people who lived in Israel / Palestine at the time of the birth of the baby Jesus. They had been under a Roman overlord for many years and their rights had been stripped away. Like any oppressed people, they longed for freedom. They felt the boot of Rome on their necks and therefore had lost their joy. It is hard to be joyful when the thing you think will make you happy seems to be out of your reach.

The angels announced the birth of a Saviour to this oppressed people. Mary’s son would bring them joy, but not as they had conceived it. The Saviour they wanted was a military ruler, a king that would drive out the Romans. The Saviour they were sent was One who would answer the deepest longing of their hearts. A longing that they did not even realise they had.

Christ’s coming still offers joy to the world. Not just to one or two people here and there, but to all who will acknowledge who He us, turn to Him and allow His life to become their life. Christ’s life is so alluring, so attractive and so full of peace, joy and purpose that it would be hard to understand why people would not turn to Him – except that His life was also wrought with pain, challenge, rejection and suffering.

Christ still brings joy to the world, but on His terms, not ours.

***Monday 18th December***

***Did you know that joy comes in the most unexpected ways?***

*“This will be a sign for you; you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”*

**Luke 2:11**

The fundamental mistake of the people of Jesus’s day is the same as the fundamental mistake of the people around us today. They wanted a Saviour that reflected their own priorities rather than one that reflected God’s priorities. They did not know the Scriptures very well, and therefore they had misunderstood, misinterpreted or forgotten the promises about the Messiah contained in the Hebrew Bible. They wanted a powerful king, with an army and weapons, a leader that would ride into Jerusalem and through the Romans out. They wanted a Saviour that would make Israel great again. What they were given was a child lying in a manger and wrapped in old rags.

Today, we often want a Saviour who looks like us, talks like us, has the same priorities as us and agrees with us. We want someone who will make our lives easier rather than more meaningful. We seek a Saviour who will make us superficially happy but not one will bring us deep satisfaction and purpose. We think that joy will be found in wealth, health and prestige when it is actually found in being content, spiritually and emotionally dependent upon God and surrender.

Christ lay in a manger, wrapped in swaddling clothes. Today He comes to us bearing the marks of a cross. He promises joy through surrender, happiness through holiness and serenity through servant-hood. The world wants joy on its terms, Christ offers us unexpected joy in unexpected ways because the pathway to joy is the road marked with humility and an honest acceptance of our brokenness.

***Tuesday 19th December***

***Did you know that our joy is linked to our desires?***

*“Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of our heart.”*

**Psalm 37:4**

There is no doubt that you will be happiest when you have what you want the most. This is an unbreakable principle. Your happiness is always predicated upon your heart’s desire. How could it be any other way? If your heart’s desire is to be a millionaire, then being poor will always make you miserable! If your heart’s desire is to be free of problems, then the slightest problem will destroy your joy. So the question is, what is your heart’s desire?

The Bible does not tell us to ignore our heart’s desire and to be content with Jesus! Instead, the Bible tells us that we are to set our desire for God above every other desire. John Piper calls this *Christian Hedonism.* It’s the idea that in order to be most happy, we must have the very best desire at the centre of our lives because our desire will shape our satisfaction. God urges us to allow God Himself to be our heart’s desire. Only then can we be truly happy. All other desires will ultimately burn out. Ask the man who built a bigger barn to house his possessions but then died if he was happy. Ask the person who has looked for happiness in a relationship or a bank balance or a career only to discover that they still have a nagging sense of joyless-ness.

Jesus said that where our treasures were, there our hearts would be also. The remarkable, and perhaps surprising, challenge of the Bible is not that we our desires are wrong, it is that we too often set our desires on the wrong thing! If you want a joyful life then let God and God alone be the desire of your heart. That is a sure way to ultimate joy and lasting happiness, but only if you are willing to put Him at the centre.

***Wednesday 20th December***

***Did you know that God’s joy is our strength?***

*“Then he said to them, ‘Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to the Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”*

**Nehemiah 8:10**

I have often wondered how it could be even remotely possible to have joy in difficult circumstances. I have found myself experiencing tragedy far too many times. The heartbreak of death, the uncertainty of ill-health, the pressure of financial worries: all of these can make joy feel like a very remote idea. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says that those who are poor in spirit are happy as are those who mourn; those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; those who are merciful; those who are pure in heart; those who are peacemakers; those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake and those who are reviled for Christ’s sake. How can that be?

The answer, I think, lies in what Nehemiah and Ezra say to the people on the day when the law is read again to the Jews. As they hear of God’s purposes and God’s ways again and as they turn from their own selfishness and pride and seek God in repentance, their humility and honesty brings joy to God’s heart. Whilst the people naturally feel stuck in their failures, their repentance has brought great joy to their God and His joy becomes their strength. Our perspective is very earthly bound. Of course we are broken-hearted when we lose someone we love. In that moment, however, if we lean into God and His love for us, then we find His comfort and peace and presence to be so beautiful and sustaining that His joy becomes our strength. The joy of the Lord is our strength precisely because we cannot always summon up our own joy. Our own joy is fleeting but His is permanent. His delight in us is what causes us to delight in Him! When we realise just how much God loves us, we discover just how wonderful His joy in us can be.

***Thursday 21st December***

***Did you know that our joy grows out of our intimacy with Jesus?***

*“I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.”*

**John 15:11**

The closer our passions and desires mirror the passions and desires of Jesus, the happier we will be. On the night that Jesus was betrayed, He spent a great deal of time instructing and guiding His disciples. He warned them that He would die. He told them He was leaving them and that He would return for them. He told them that the world would reject them. He reminded than that He would suffer. Yet in the midst of all of this, He told them that they could have a joy that was so comprehensive that it could be described as complete. In other words, there was a way for them to have a joy that was pervasive, a joy that impacted every sphere of their existence. How would they achieve such joy? By abiding in Him, by obeying Him and by keeping His commandments.

There are so many competing priorities in our lives and so many demands upon our hearts and our time. It is only as we give Jesus the central place that He demands that we find true and lasting joy. We used to sing a song in the church where I became a Christian that reminded us that true worship flowed from finding the joy of reaching God’s heart and allowing our will to become enthralled with His love. That’s a lovely old word, isn’t it, *enthralled*? May God allow us once again to be enthralled by Jesus! The secret to lasting joy is to be so caught up with Him that what He wants becomes what brings us joy.

***Friday 22nd December***

***Did you know that life with God brings everlasting joy?***

*“And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”*

**Isaiah 35:10**

There can be nothing more life giving than a life given to God! He makes sense of life. He gives meaning, purpose and beauty to the everyday. He brings good news to the oppressed. He binds up the brokenhearted. He announces liberty to those who are held captive. He releases those who have been held in prison. He announces grace to you when you are fearful of judgment and rejection. He provides for those in need. He gives garlands in exchange for their ashes and gladness instead of deep sadness. He gives the gift of praise to those who are fainting with frailty. He makes twigs feel like oaks. He makes the marred into mirrors of His glory. For all these reasons and so many more, allowing what He wants to become the centre of what we want is the pathway to peace and the only journey to true joy.

If you are struggling to understand the idea that your joy can be discovered in what makes someone else happy, then just ask someone who has been truly I love what makes them most happy. It is to see the one they love fulfilled and content. To give someone you love what they want brings the greatest joy to your heart. Above our work, our effort and our stuff, Jesus wants our hearts. When we give Him our hearts, we do what He wants and when we know the joy this brings Him, our own lives are inundated with the most wonderful and lasting joy!

***Saturday 23rd December***

***Did you know that God’s love is most clearly seen in what Christ has done for us?***

*“God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him.”*

**1 John 4:9**

As we approach Christmas Eve, we see in the manger the picture of true Love. The manger sits in the shadow of the Cross. These two things point to how much God has loved us. He was born as a human being for us. He died as a human being for us. He rose again as a human being for us. Why, because He loves us. And He loves us because He is love.

There is no greater example of love than this. Paul could not summon up the words to describe it in his letter to the Romans. He reminds them that whilst they were still caught in their sins, Christ died for them. He tells his Roman brothers and sisters that occasionally someone would be willing to die for a good person but never would someone die for a bad person. He then reminds the Romans that Christ, the only truly Good Person who has ever lived has died for each of them – bad people. John picks up the same idea when he reminds his audience that God is love. For Paul, Peter, John and all of the other apostles there is one place that shows the love of God for people above anywhere else – the Cross.

If we want to know how much God loves us, then all we need to do is look at the cross. Something is only as valuable as what a person is willing to pay for it. You and I may consider that we are of little value. We may struggle with low self-esteem and put ourselves at the bottom of the pile, but ask yourself this, what was God willing to pay for you?

That is how much He loves us!

**Advent and Love**

And so, as we approach the last week of Advent, we come to what many would think is the centre of our journey – love. This word is used so often in our culture today that if we are not careful it is stripped of its meaning. Love, however, sits at the heart of the Christian life and it sits at the heart of any Christian understanding of God and His purposes in the world. We live in a world where love has been sexualized, minimized and re-defined. Against that backdrop, this Advent, we will reflect on the love of God in Christ and the love of Christ in us. The prophets point us to hope; John the Baptist point us to peace; Mary points us to joy; but the Lord Jesus Himself points us to love. Perhaps this week we can remember in prayer those who feel unloved. Maybe who springs to mind might be us and the way we think about ourselves; it could be people in our families or churches; it might even be those people around the world who have no one to love them. From the orphans of Rwanda, the abandoned in Syria, the world is full of people who think they are unloved or who have never known love. This Advent and Christmas time may each one experience the love of God.

***Sunday 24th December***

***Did you know that loving others includes loving everyone, not just our friends?***

*“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy’ But I say to you, ‘Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...”*

**Matthew 5:43-44**

On this Christmas Eve, let me remind you of the most amazing thing in the whole world. God sent His Son to earth for you and now asks you to go to the ends of the earth for Him. He invites us into His great story of grace and redemption. Just how far does the love of God reach? I think the answer to that depends on how far we will let it reach.

There are two groups of people in the world. There are those who are your friends and there are those who are your enemies. Jesus tells us that we are to love our friends and neighbours, and He also tells us that we are to love our enemies. Who is excluded from either of those categories? I think that every human being who has ever lived is included in one of these two groups of people, and we are called to love them. Today, on the eve of celebrating the birth of Christ, is there anyone whom you are refusing to love? Perhaps you are refusing to love a family member, a colleague, or a neighbour? Is there a person, or a group, whom you find it very hard to love? Maybe you feel unable to love people who are from a different culture, or religion? Or maybe you think you cannot love people whose sexual orientation you disagree with? Remember that to love someone does not mean that you agree with him or her. Acceptance does not equate to agreement.

As Advent gives way to Christmas, how can you love others? How can you become a living witness to the most remarkable message the world has ever known, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself? How can your life become one of hope, peace, joy and love?

Happy Christmas

***Christmas Day***

***Did you know that God is love but that love is not God?***

*“Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love”*

**1 John 4:8**

The greatest misconceptions in our lives are rooted in the misconceptions we have about God. For many people, both inside the Church and outside the Church, the idea of God is full of dread or fear. They think of God being first a Judge. Their predominant image is of a God who is like a harsh schoolmaster. He stands with a great stick ready to beat those who disobey Him. He delights in punishment and retribution. For others, God is so weak-willed and compliant that He ignores all of our choices and disregards them so that He can love us. The truth is very different from both caricatures.

God is, at his very core, love. It is His love that motivates the beautiful relationship between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. It is His love that motivates the creation of the world as the home for human beings. It is His love that allows us to reject Him even though the cost is great. It is His love that calls Abraham and through Abraham Israel. It is His love that sends the Son to fulfill the loving demands of God Himself. It is His love that comes to us before we came to Him. It is His love that challenges our sin, exposes our weaknesses and shows us the way back to relationship with Him.

God’s love is a strong, vibrant, life-transforming love. Love is not God. God is love because His love is expressed in His holiness, His mercy, His judgment and most clearly and beautifully in His Son.

Today, stop and remember the extent of His love – He came to earth to show us. He lived for us, He died for us, He rose again for us. He is ascended for us. He stands in Heaven for us now. He has poured out His Spirit on us. He is returning for us.

What a Saviour!

***Tuesday 26th December***

***Did you know that God loved us before we loved him?***

*“In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and send his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.”*

**1 John 4:10**

Christmas is a time of sharing gifts. Those gifts are a way of expressing our love for one another. Many of you will share gifts with others as a symbol of your love for them and of God’s love for them. Others of you will be supporting those in need in very different ways. Thank you so much for whatever you do to show the love of God to others.

God takes the initiative with us. We didn’t begin this relationship, God did. We didn’t approach God first; He approached us first. The implications of this are profound. Our worship of God is always a response to God’s revelation to us. Our service of God is a response to what He has done for us. We love because He first loved us. We love Him because He first loved us and we love others because He first loved us and loved them. We join with God in mission because of His love for the world. We join with one another in the Church in ministry and in fellowship because His love draws us together. We do not create Christian community, God does. We join Him in His work. The Christian does not ask God to bless what we are doing, we ask God to help us to do what He is blessing. As people who are loved by God we are content to play second fiddle to Him. He is the one that the world needs to see. We are not the hero of the Christian story. God is. He is more important than we are and we only find our value and our worth in Him.

***Wednesday 27th December***

***Did you know that our love flows from God’s love?***

*“Beloved, let us love one another because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God...Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.”*

**1 John 4:7,11**

Never underestimate the love God has for you. If God had a wallet, your picture would be in it. If He had a fireplace, your photograph would be in a beautiful frame and resting in it. So many Christians fail to understand this simple truth and as a result their whole Christian life becomes one of performance and trying to earn God’s favour.

God’s demonstration of His love to us is seen in the fact that He sent His Son for us. This is remarkable in itself, but what is even more remarkable is that God takes the initiative; He loves us before we love Him. Before I knew God existed, let alone I believed in a God that loved me, He loved me. One of the very first verses in the Bible that I memorized was from Romans 5. It speaks of a God who loved me whilst I was still a sinner. I will never understand this depth of love but it has utterly transformed my life. I have nothing to prove to God. Nothing I can do will make Him love me any more and nothing I can do will make Him love me any less. I cannot disillusion God because He does not have any illusions about me anyway.

This Advent, amidst all the preparation and running around, take time every day to remember what you will be celebrating at Christmas. God’s love in Christ is the most inexplicable and yet the most beautiful thing. He does not love us because we are lovable. He loves us because He made us. It is His love that gives us both worth and value. What a wonderful Saviour we have.

***Thursday 28th December***

***Did you know that joy is a choice and a command?***

*“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.”*

**Philippians 4:4**

Joy flows from a choice to rejoice and rejoicing flows from a choice to obey the command of God. It is a choice to rejoice despite the fact that it is also a command. Paul told the Philippians to rejoice twice in just one short sentence. He didn’t tell them they had it as an option rather than an obligation but the fact that he urges them to rejoice clearly shows that they could choose not to. I have struggled with the idea that a command and a choice can go hand in hand. If it is a choice, then it is a choice, right? Wrong. As a parent, I have learned that I can tell, or command, my children to do something, but that they can choose to do what they want instead. The extent to which they experience the consequences of my command is dependent upon the extent of their choice to follow it. The command remains a command but the choice to obey is theirs. That is the idea that Paul presents here.

So what about me? There are times when rejoicing is easy. When things are going well. When what I expected happens. When God says yes to my prayers. In those moments, joy is not difficult to experience because I have chosen to rejoice. It’s harder when I cannot rejoice. When God has said no to a prayer. When I am suffering. When I am confused. When praise is difficult. How do I rejoice when praise is hard? I have discovered that in those moments, my rejoicing involves giving God my questions. My pain becomes my offering. I choose to put God first by being honest about my confusion or my sorrow or my pain and as I do so, the focus of my heart shifts away from me to Him. His priorities become my priorities again, and as a result I am able to experience His joy again.

So this Advent, choose joy by choosing rejoicing, and choose rejoicing by choosing praise, and let your honest, whole life become your gift to God.

***Friday 29th December***

***Did you know that God’s command to love others starts with loving Him?***

*“He said to them, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment.”*

**Matthew 22:37-38**

There is only One Person who deserves the centre of our affection and our love – God Himself. All other loves are secondary to love for Him. Anything or anyone who has the centre of our lives other than God is an idol. He sits above all things and all people. There is nothing like Him. It is only as He has the centre of us that we are able to love others at all. Our love for other people flows from our love for Him. Without His love, our love is shallow. His love is a deep well that never runs dry.

This Christmas time, allow yourself a few moments to stop and make sure that Jesus is at the centre of your life. Do you love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind? Does He have the best of you?

Let me suggest something to you. At some point today give God a few moments of your time. Maybe after you have read this devotional you could sing a carol that expresses your love of God. Maybe you could write God a note, or a card and place it on your mantelpiece. Perhaps you could read the story of the nativity again. Whatever you do, do something to express your love of God and your gratitude toward Him. Reflect on the last year. Has God grown more important to you or less important to you? Have other things or people been allowed to squeeze Him out? Ask Him to re-set your priorities again today and allow His love to be the engine of your life.

***Saturday 30th December***

***Did you know that God’s command to love Him flows into loving others too?***

*“And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”*

**Matthew 22:39-40**

God’s love is not supposed to stop with us. We are both the recipients of God’s love and the conduits of it. As recipients of God’s love, we are transformed by it. It changes the way we think about both ourselves and also our place in the world; but as conduits of His love we are called to let His love flow through us to other people. The incarnation reveals that God comes to us and that He becomes one of us. Behind this truth is the principle of trajectory. The trajectory of God coming to us in turn should propel us to go to others.

The love of God is to be shared. It is to be shared in words by letting other people know of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and giving them the opportunity to respond to Him. It is to be shared by welcoming others into our lives. We demonstrate the love of God by opening our homes to others, by giving them time. God’s love is demonstrated in meeting the needs of the broken, the poor, the dispossessed and the vulnerable. Every time we respect the human dignity of someone else we show God’s love. God’s love is shown to the world when we stand up for those who cannot stand up for themselves. We demonstrate the love of God when we value and cherish the created world and look after it well. To call myself a Christian but to refuse to share the love of God with others is perhaps the worst of sins. To see someone in need and ignore them; to refuse to share the Gospel with words; to have too much and not be willing to share with others; these are some of the worst choices I can make. This Advent, as God’s love flows to you, let it also flow through you. Could you set another place at your Christmas table? Could you help a family out that is struggling? Could you do something that shows to others that God’s love in you also flows through you?

***Sunday 31st December***

***Did you know that Every day is a fresh start with God, not just every year?***

*“See I am making all things new”*

**Revelation 21:5**

So many people make a New Year’s Resolution, only to break it within a few days or a few weeks of having made it. Maybe we do that because we like to have milestones and moments that we can look back on as definitive and determinative. Definitive because they somehow shape who we are and determinative because they somehow shape who we want to become. I have made resolutions at the beginning of a year too. Some of those resolutions were about joining a gym, some were about my prayer life, some were about my reading patterns and some were about my devotional relationship with God; and that is only a few. I know what it feels like to make a resolution, and then the disappointment you feel in yourself when you break it or let it slip. I am sure that the devil uses such discouragement to stop us trying, but what if there is a way of having a fresh start every day, not just every year.

Jeremiah the prophet looked at the destruction of Jerusalem at the end of the 7th century and was deeply discouraged. He was heartbroken – but then he remembered the faithfulness of God and he declared ‘The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, His mercies are never failing. They are new every morning!’ (Lamentations 3:21). God’s love for us is unending and constant. He stands ready to receive and renew us *every single time* we fall. He doesn’t need us to make a New Year’s Resolution – He is ready to work with us every moment of every day.

Don’t let yourself be discouraged today – remember God is the God who will one day make all things new. So let Him do some work in your life at this very moment. As you step into 2018 may you do so with a deeply rooted confidence of the faithfulness and mercy of God. He never lets us down!