



Rejoice Always!

Study Three



Thomas Webster, *A Village Choir*, 1847



What has brought you joy, a spark or flame, in the last week or two?

1) Good News!

(Read Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–11)

‘For as the soil makes the young plant come up
and a garden causes seeds to grow,
so the Sovereign Lord will make righteousness
and praise spring up before all nations.’ (v11)

This passage may not originally have been written with Jesus in mind, but when reading these words, it is not difficult to see how Jesus connected with picture they paint. The prophet speaks of being anointed by God to bring good news to the poor, and those who are struggling, hurting, grieving, or blind. We are reminded that God loves justice and hates wrongdoing.

This is a very practical mission, one of restoration and renewal, and the promise is not simply that life will improve, as the writer uses phrases such as ‘a crown of beauty’, ‘the oil of Joy’, ‘a garment

of praise’, and describes the people as becoming ‘oaks of righteousness’.

These words remind us that God does not come simply to those who have everything sorted out. As we continue our journey through Advent we are invited to look beyond the celebrations, decorations and fancy shop windows to those who still need to hear good news, find justice, comfort, healing and hope.

Discuss..

What might good news look like for the 'poor' or 'struggling' in our communities today?

'A crown of beauty instead of ashes' and 'the oil of joy instead of mourning'. What do these images say about the kind of transformation God wants to bring, and can you think of situations where you have seen something like this happen?

Advent is usually associated with joy and celebration, but Isaiah also speaks honestly about grief, brokenness and injustice. Why is it important to hold those two things together at Christmas?

If God is still bringing good news, freedom, healing and hope into the world, where might God be asking the local church to join in?

2) Holding On... and Letting Go

(Read 1 Thessalonians 5:16–24)

'Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.' (vv16-18)

In this chapter, Paul's focus is on 'the day of the Lord', which in the Old Testament often refers to the time of divine judgment for the enemies of God and the time of deliverance for the people of God – to which Paul adds 'the day of Christ Jesus' (Phil 1:6).

What Paul wants is for his his readers to be ready, and that means more than simply living good and peaceful lives, helping others and upholding justice.

This is about the preparedness of body, mind and spirit. Paul's instructions here read almost like a checklist, but underneath is something more integrated, a whole way of being alert and grounded at the same time. Rejoice, pray, give thanks, allow the Spirit to work, testing prophecies, holding on to what is good and rejecting what is not.

Discuss..

Advent is supposed to be a season of joy, but it can also be a difficult time for people. What do you think Paul means by rejoicing? Is it possible to rejoice even when life isn't going well?

Paul doesn't say to give thanks for everything, but in everything. What difference does that small distinction make?

If you chose just one of Paul's instructions to concentrate on during Advent - rejoicing, praying, giving thanks, listening to the Spirit, or holding on to what is good - which would you choose, and why?

Who Are We?

(Read John 1:6–8, 19–28)

‘He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.’ (v8)

John the Baptist was, and still is, an important part of the Advent story, but he was clear as to his role when interrogated by the religious leaders. To every question about who he was – Messiah, Elijah, The promised prophet? - the answer was ‘I am not.’

Instead, John describes himself as a voice crying out in the wilderness, making straight the way of the Lord.’



Nicolas Poussin *St John Baptising in the River Jordan* c1630

John knows his role is not to attract attention to himself, but to point beyond to Jesus. He is a signpost, not the destination. And that makes John a good companion for Advent. In the middle of all the noise and bustle of this season, John’s message is simple - look beyond all this and notice who is coming.

Advent isn’t simply about getting ready for Christmas; it is about making space to recognise Christ among us. And like John, we don’t have to be the centre of attention, but we are called to be signposts!

Discuss..

John describes himself as a ‘voice’. What do you think it means to be a voice for God in the world today?

John is very clear about who he is not. Why do you think knowing our own identity and limitations can be important in serving God?

In our daily lives, and not just through Advent, how can we also be ‘witnesses to the light?’

There is a lot of noise around Christmas. What helps you notice God in the midst of it all?

Closing Prayer

Loving God,
as we journey through Advent,
help us to wait with hope,
to listen with open hearts,
and to make room for Christ in our lives.
When we are busy, help us to be still.
When we are discouraged, renew our hope.
When we are distracted, turn our eyes towards you.
And when we see your light,
help us to share it with others.
Go with us into the week ahead.
May we carry your peace in our hearts,
your love in our actions,
and your hope in all that we do.

And a blessing -
May the God of hope fill us with joy and peace as we trust in him.
May Christ walk with us through the week ahead,
and may the light of his presence shine through us wherever we go.
Amen.

*"There are two ways of spreading light: to be the candle or
the mirror that reflects it."*
Edith Wharton : *Vesalius in Zante*