

Isaiah 55 *'Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. ² Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labour on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and you will delight in the richest of fare. ³ Give ear and come to me; listen, that you may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David. ⁴ See, I have made him a witness to the peoples, a ruler and commander of the peoples. ⁵ Surely you will summon nations you know not, and nations you do not know will come running to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has endowed you with splendour.'* ⁶ *Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near. ⁷ Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts. Let them turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will freely pardon. ⁸ 'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,' declares the Lord. ⁹ 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. ¹⁰ As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, ¹¹ so is my word that goes out from my mouth: it will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. ¹² You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands. ¹³ Instead of the thorn-bush will grow the juniper, and instead of briars the myrtle will grow. This will be for the Lord's renown, for an everlasting sign, that will endure for ever.'*

Luke 2:1-20 *In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ² (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³ And everyone went to their own town to register. ⁴ So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. ⁵ He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷ and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them. ⁸ And there were shepherds living out in the fields near by, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.'* ¹³ *Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ¹⁴ 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.'* ¹⁵ *When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.'* ¹⁶ *So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.*

Last week we looked at peace. It has different meanings depending on context. Joy is one of those words where the meaning is somewhat narrower than peace. Joy is a feeling of great pleasure and happiness. That's the secular meaning. Like peace, it is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit. Joy is happiness which is comforting, content and full of peace. Joy (like love, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control) is an enduring attitude of the heart and spirit, and a natural part of the Christian faith.

Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 - *Be joyful always, pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*

Like many exhortations in the Bible, is it possible for us to achieve? Can we be joyful always? Can we pray continually? Can we give thanks in all circumstances? Like happiness, joy may be something we feel from time to time, interspersed with other feelings less positive. How hard is it to maintain a joyful, prayerful, thankful, peaceful, loving attitude to life in all circumstances when life throws up situations when we may feel miserable, unhappy, and plainly annoyed with ourselves and others?

The passage in Isaiah reminds the people of Israel that they have so much to be grateful (or thankful) for. God provided them with a land flowing with milk and honey and he guided them with ways for living that would do them good and make them a nation who worship the one and only true God whose ways all would admire if they really looked at who he is. Whatever the world thinks about Israel today, even those who hate Jews have to admire what they have achieved in the last 80 years compared with all their neighbours. Envy and jealousy are the reasons for antisemitism, though the world won't say this openly. Whatever the people who dismiss the revelation of God's guidance for mankind will say or believe, when challenged for a better way, for better morality, they will always fall short. God's ways are better than man's ways because man's ways are not based on love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Man's ways are always, however much they are wrapped up with good intentions, based on forcing ideas on unwilling people. Sadly in the past, there have been Christians seeking to impose their views on unwilling people, rather than letting the Holy Spirit do his work in a loving, joyful, peaceful, patient way to change lives.

The passage in Luke. ⁹ *An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.* ¹⁰ *But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.'* ¹¹ *Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.* ¹² *This will be a sign to you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.'* ¹³ *Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,* ¹⁴ *'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.'* The good news that will cause great joy for all the people is true enough, but as we see in Isaiah, God's ways are not our ways, because the joy forecast didn't happen immediately. The promise of joy for all the people has happened over the past twenty centuries for those who accepted Jesus as Lord and Saviour. God's promises can so easily be misunderstood. God's timing isn't our timing. His revelations to mankind about the coming Messiah were made hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus. His revelation to the shepherds terrified and astonished them, and part of the message directed them to see the baby Jesus, while part would be for another time – the cause of great joy – while the last part *'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests'* is for all time, past, present and future.

So now the interactive part. Looking at God's thoughts and ways being different from our thoughts and ways, can anyone describe a time the reality of God's fulfilled promised looked different than what you expected? How did you respond?

I'll start us off. When we were looking at what the new St Andrew's building would be like in the mid 1990s, before anyone had drawn up plans and just had a list of things we would like it to have, in my mind's eye it would be a rather plain modest building on the scale of the existing church. Yes, there were extras that would be desirable, but would they fit in the budget? The site offered was at the back of the Watling Street car park, with a frontage on the Dane John gardens. When the plans made by three architects came back, they were all far grander than anything I had expected and the one chosen with its dome – which has no practical function – and the site with frontage on Watling Street was very different from the initial thoughts five or six years earlier. What we got was three or four times more expensive than what the value of the old church was, and three times bigger as well, and it didn't cost us a penny... in fact we received money for the delays in the plans being agreed. God blessed us mightily. It remains hard to understand why we were so blessed. Most of the people involved on the Council, the development company and the builders were not Christians, though the architect and the lead building contractor were. The architect who suggested the better site on Watling Street didn't get the job but persuaded the Council to offer the site we have instead of the one at the back of the car park!

Over to you.

The challenge for us all is to be joyful always. Many years ago, I was invited to a Full Gospel Businessmen's Fellowship meeting, which involved a dinner and talk afterwards. The idea came from an Armenian man in California who appeared to have no particular gifts or talents that any church could use because he was just an ordinary man. But he came up with the idea that what he could do was arrange dinners and have speakers come to give the Gospel. There were and still are plenty of groups of businessmen who meet together for various reasons – like the Rotary Club for example – to do good works. He started this in the 1950s and it took off with many chapters all over America and Europe. He wrote a book about his experiences called "The

happiest people on earth". A catchy title but do we Christians live up to being the happiest, most joyful, most peaceful and loving people on earth. There may be fellowships where this is the case, but plenty of fellowships don't quite match up to what God wants us to be like, reflecting his glory and love to a world in need of good news, and being really happy joyful people. As soon as people started being happy and joyful in worship, they were condescendingly called "happy clappy" Christians singing "choruses" instead of proper hymns and having guitars and a band instead of the organ and robed choir. None of us wants churchianity, none of us wants to have long faces so others can see how seriously dull we are. None of us wants to be sad, miserable, and negative about life, regardless of whether there is much to be sad, miserable and negative about. We are to be a joyful people. This is what David had to say about his relationship with God.

Psalm 16: 7-11 ⁷ *I will praise the Lord, who counsels me; even at night my heart instructs me.* ⁸ *I keep my eyes always on the Lord. With him at my right hand, I shall not be shaken.* ⁹ *Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure,* ¹⁰ *because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, nor will you let your faithful one see decay.* ¹¹ *You make known to me the path of life; **you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.***

Being filled with joy in God's presence isn't just fanciful words but can be a reality. To make it a reality we are doing the teaching on Holy Spirit through the Dunamis courses, so that we can all receive the joy that comes knowing that the Spirit of God dwells in us and can use us to do his will. With that joy comes peace and a thirst for more of God's goodness and faithfulness. Without the Holy Spirit we are empty vessels and what ever we strive to do will be hard work instead of a joy. Praise God that I didn't find writing this hard work, but a joy even when I was feeling not so good because of a cold.

This Christmas our challenge is share with those around us the joy we have because we know Jesus.