

LUKE 2:21-35
REJOICE! REJOICE!

Do you have a favourite Christmas song? Perhaps it is Slade – ‘Merry Christmas Everybody’; or Wizzard – ‘I wish it could be Christmas every day’; or Bing Crosby – ‘White Christmas’; or perhaps it is a favourite carol – ‘Away in a manger’ or ‘Hark the herald angels sing’; or something else entirely. Some music is associated with a season of year, like Christmas music! I know someone who did what we’re doing, working through Luke and he started in the autumn, but with the Christmas story then and they sang some carols in September; that must have been really odd! There is no reason why not to do that, and sometimes taking music away from its connections makes us listen to it in a new way! Music conveys a whole range of emotions and that’s true whether you are able to play music or simply enjoy listening to it. There is great exultant music that makes the heart sing when you hear it or play it or sing it, it lifts the soul though it need not be spiritual music. There is other music that expresses the very opposite emotion, singing the blues brings you down to the depths of despair or puts that sense of hopelessness into words.

There are 4 songs in the Christmas story, all in Luke and each known best by the titles given to them from the first words in their Latin versions: the first is Mary’s song which we looked at a little last week – the Magnificat; the second is Zechariah’s song when John is born, called the Benedictus; the third is the angel’s song when announcing birth of Jesus to the shepherds and called the Gloria in Excelsis Deo; the fourth we read today, the Nunc Dimittis sung by Simeon, the old man who met Jesus in the temple. All of these have been set to music in various ways and can be sung, reflecting each one’s mood and great themes. All in their own way rejoice at the coming of Jesus and of salvation to Israel; all have their own ways in which they do that, their own styles, but each rejoices that salvation has come, the story has begun, the curtain has been drawn back and the work God promised long ago has begun.

How does Mary rejoice? Well, we looked at some of this last week, but to repeat briefly: she sees God turning the world upside down; she sees that through her son and her saviour, Jesus Christ, God will bless her and people like her: *“He has...” (1:48) “He has...” (1:52f)* and so she can begin her song *“my soul...” (1:46f)* This is not simply rejoicing; this is rejoicing with a reason. This is not simply a song that says ‘rejoice’ but tells us why to rejoice. Mary rejoices because God has begun to deliver and save His people, His needy, poor people and rescue them from sin and from their oppressors. So Mary rejoices in much more than the fact that she is going to have a baby and that her baby will be a great king; she rejoices in what her baby will do to save the world.

Zechariah’s song is different from the rest in that the occasion for his rejoicing is the birth of his son, John. Yet, that is only part of the song. It begins: *“Praise be...” (1:68)* again rehearsing something of the way in which God is about to complete His promises made a long time before. His particular joy is that his son, John, will have a special place in all of this: *“And you...” (1:76f)* The birth

of his son - that in itself must have been cause for great rejoicing in the Zechariah household, since they were a long time childless! But Zechariah's deepest joy is that his son is part of something so much bigger; his deepest reason for rejoicing is that John will be the one to go before the Messiah; John will be the one to prepare the people to meet their King!

When the angels sing, Jesus has been born. Their song, the Gloria in Excelsis Deo, tells the good news that the baby is born. Perhaps this is most memorably immortalised in the carol 'Hark herald angels sing'. "*Glory to...*" (2:14) They bring a short song of great joy, bringing glory and honour to God in response to the good news that "*today in...*" (2:11) They are bringing that good news to frightened shepherds who wonder what on earth is going on, yet here are angels rejoicing to see the Saviour of world being born. The shepherds privileged to share in that sense of rejoicing. I'm not really sure what it means that angels rejoice, but rejoice they do and their rejoicing is a response to coming of Jesus.

Then we come to Simeon. Mary and Joseph took Jesus to the temple for two reasons. First of all, there was an offering to make for the mother's purification forty days after she had given birth to her child. Two pigeons was the offering to be made by poor people. Second, there was sense of dedicating the child to God; every first-born child was dedicated to God and an offering of 5 shekels made on child's behalf. Mary and Joseph came to make these offerings and in temple they met two people, Simeon and Anna, both presumed to be old people, though actually there is nothing to give away Simeon's age other than that he says he is now willing to die.

Both of these people were part of a group called 'The Quiet in the Land' faithful people, devout people who prayed and hoped and longed for God's salvation to come. It was people like these who saved true religion in Israel according to some, humble, obscure, devout people, people whose names are forgotten, who were never leaders in Israel, but who kept the flame of faith alive when other more prominent groups had either turned religion into political nationalism, or made it a dry ecclesiastical keeping of rules, or who turned religion into a sceptical questioning exercise. These quiet, faithful people longed for the day when God would send His Saviour to Israel; then they could die happy and at peace!

What did Simeon see when Mary and Joseph and Jesus walked into the temple that day? Did he see a poor couple with their first child coming into a place with which they were quite unfamiliar? They might never have been in the temple before; certainly they had never been there to go through these ceremonies before and were not sure what to do perhaps; this was their first child. They were poor people, there was nothing rich about them; the offering they bring tells us that they are poor; they can't afford a lamb, so they bring two pigeons. To everyone else, they are just a poor peasant couple in the temple to perform ritual ceremonies around their child. To Simeon, they are much more than that. Simeon's eye of faith sees something more than that; Simeon sees who this child really is.

He rejoices at what he sees: “*Sovereign Lord...*” (2:29ff) To everyone else, this is just a six-week old baby; to Simeon, this is God’s long-promised salvation for Israel and the world. All his hopes and prayers are answered in this six-week old baby and Simeon is delighted; now he can happily die in peace because his eyes have seen what he longed to see; there is nothing more for him to see now than this; it doesn’t get any better than this for Simeon; he had seen what he longed to see and lived to see. He sounds a note of caution: “*this child...*” (2:34f) His song is a response to what he has seen; he has seen God’s Saviour; how he knew we will never know; how the Spirit of God inspired him, pointed him in Jesus’ direction? He knew and he rejoiced and sang his song of faith and joy at meeting Jesus. His song was a response to meeting Jesus and seeing his hopes realised, his prayers answered.

Rejoice! Music helps us to rejoice when we come to Church. There are some big, blousy hymns that just beg to be belted out as a way of rejoicing in God. Yet, there are times when we sing them as if they say nothing grand, or with long faces as if we don’t really understand or appreciate the force of the words. I try to find a hymn like that each week to open the service, a hymn that just cries out to us rejoice in God and in what God has done. There are some great old hymns like that and some very good new hymns that do the same. The great pity with many of the new hymns that while musically are very big, actually they are very thin in their content; they tell us to rejoice, but don’t tell us why! To rejoice properly, we need to know why we rejoice, what we have to rejoice about, then we can sing with all our hearts. This is not about getting the tune right; this is about letting our hearts feel the joy of what God has done for us.

I know that not all of you are sports fans, but if you go to a football match and if your team is winning you hear the crowd simply let themselves go in cheering their team and singing. Or to go Murrayfield on a rugby occasion when Scotland are winning and listen to the way the crowd sings Flower of Scotland, responding to the team’s efforts and their victory. You capture a sense of excitement at these kinds of sporting events as the crowd responds to the team. How is it then, that when we come to Church, and we have so much more to be thankful to God for, that when we sing our heads are down and we sing with long faces? How can we sing words like “Christ Triumphant ever reigning” with long faces? But we do! Is it because we don’t understand that Christ Jesus is the greatest king who ever reigned and who still reigns? Is it that we don’t appreciate the scale of the greatest story ever told? Is it because there is something in us that prevents us from rejoicing in Christ?

You might say ‘I don’t feel like rejoicing today!’ I understand that. I understand that there are days when we’re not in the mood to rejoice, when circumstances get us down and things get on top of us. But I also know of people who have come into Church in that mood, but whose mood has been lifted when they sing to God. This is not about mood; this is about the way we think. You might say ‘I’m not a singer; I can’t sing!’ Neither can I; this is not about being able to sing; this is about the way we think! At Rock Solid last week, we played a game with a parachute and asked the children to think of

something to give thanks for; they found it hard to start with but once they got going they came up with lots of things to thank God for! I couldn't stop them! Do the same! What one thing would you give thanks to God for? The first answer might be Jesus; you might have all kinds of other answers. One answer is enough to give us cause to rejoice; that in itself is a sign of the love that God has for us; multiply reasons and how much bigger does it get. Rejoice – we all have reasons to rejoice, to smile and open our hearts to rejoice in what God has done and open our mouths to sing.

Mary, Zechariah, the angels, Simeon all rejoiced in God's salvation; all in different ways they rejoiced at the coming of Jesus; they all rejoiced in the goodness and grace of God to a needy world. We know how the story ends; we know what this child went on to be and to achieve; we have tasted the fruit of His work, He has become our Saviour. Rejoice! Do you? Will you? It is only possible when we allow Jesus to touch our hearts and minds; when we open our hearts to the love and grace of God, when we see for ourselves how good God is and has been to us! Then we will respond to His goodness and grace; then we will rejoice!