

Rejoice in the Lord, your God

Isaiah 61:10-62:5; Luke 2:22-39; Gal 4:4-7

In his gospel, Luke wants to firmly anchor the birth and infancy narratives in God's unfolding salvation story. They were prophesied from of old but now, in the fullness of time, were being fulfilled in the coming of Jesus, the Messiah. So Luke, though a Gentile, is very careful to faithfully record the important Jewish ceremonies that Jesus, as a Jewish baby, experienced. He was circumcised on the eighth day (Luke 2:21) and given the name Jesus. And here in this passage we had read, Jesus was presented in the Temple as the first born son of Joseph and Mary, and Mary brought the offering for her purification ceremony, following the birth. All very Jewish and following the Law of Moses, but echoed in that short reading from Paul's letter to the Galatians, "When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, **born under the law**" (Gal. 4:4). Four times in the passage in Luke we have reference to the Law.

So let's picture Joseph and Mary coming up the road from Bethlehem to the Temple for these ceremonies. They were obviously a very godly, observant Jewish family following the requirements of the Law. They were also somewhat poor, as they brought the offering proscribed for poorer families. And then as they come into the Temple the unexpected happened – two very respectable, godly people, an old man and an old lady, both testify that this baby is the longed for Messiah. It is interesting that in Simeon and Anna we have **two witnesses** and "every charge must be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses" (2 Cor. 13:1, echoing Deut. 19:15). They combined male and female, and perhaps even the old adversarial kingdoms of Judah and Israel, for Anna is said to come from Asher, one of the northern tribes. Both were impeccable witnesses, they were very devout, they were both recognised as prophets and they were both elderly, full of the wisdom of age. Their acknowledgement of Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah happened very publically in the Temple, the very centre of Jewish life and worship.

Simeon, the prophet, explains to Mary and Joseph something of the glory of the person of the Messiah, and no wonder they marvel at what he says to them, that the Messiah will have a ministry far beyond Israel, "a light for revelation to the Gentiles". Simeon went on to bless them and say to Mary his mother, "Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed" (Luke 2:34-35). Surely Simeon is seeing a fulfilment of Malachi 3 "And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his

coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap" (Mal. 3:1-2). For some He brings joy, for others He brings judgement, for He will reveal the thoughts of many hearts.

Now I am fascinated by Simeon, this is the only reference to him in the whole of the Bible. We are told that God, the Holy Spirit, had told him that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Messiah, the Anointed One. We don't know when he was told that, days, weeks, months or years before, but he trusted in the God who had told him. He is a model to us of faithful trust, God has said and therefore I will trust Him to do it, even if it means waiting years. Perhaps he came every day into the Temple saying to God, "is this the day I will see Him?" And now picture the aged Simeon, taking the infant Jesus into his arms and almost crying "God you've done it, Your Messiah has come and here I am holding Him in my arms. What a faithful God You are, keeping Your promises to Israel, yet including even the Gentiles in Your purposes, for You want the whole world to benefit from His coming". You can almost see the tears of joy running down his beard. God had told him he would see the Messiah and here he is embracing him and holding him close to his heart, surely his heart was close to bursting with joy. And then the godly Anna comes in and joins in the rejoicing and the praise party.

The angels rejoiced and sang at Christmas, as interestingly they did at the creation of the world. Here we have Simeon and Anna rejoicing in God's goodness, now it is our turn to rejoice in God who is faithful to His promises, a covenant keeping God, abounding in grace and mercy.

Now I am a very serious sort of a bloke, very task oriented. I don't find it easy to rejoice in God, so this message is as much to me as to anyone. King David was able to praise God with careless abandonment and some of us find it much easier to be uninhibited in our praise and worship of God than I do. However, I do believe that all of us frequently need the reminder to rejoice in the Lord. Paul repeated the injunction in his letter to the Philippians "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it **again**: Rejoice!" (Phil. 4:4). The Psalms are full of encouragement to rejoice in God (I counted at least 21 occurrences, specifically to rejoice). Having said I am a serious sort of fellow, I must confess to have laughed so much at church many years ago that I had to go to the doctor the next day with a sore jaw!

If we are to rejoice in God then let us consider what God has done. It all revolves around that word salvation, but often we see this in a narrow sense, salvation from sin and death, but we need to grasp the full extent of God's plan of salvation for us and particularly the heart of the God who brings us

salvation. For Simeon's song is all about what God has done, not what we have achieved, but what God in his grace and mercy has brought to us. He says "for my eyes have seen **Your** salvation that **You** have prepared in the presence of all peoples" (Luke 2:30-31). We get the same message in Isaiah of what God has done – "**He, that is the Lord, has clothed me** with garments of salvation **and arrayed me** in a robe of his righteousness, **the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise** to sprout up before all the nations" (Isa. 61:10-11). We rejoice in what God has done for us and in us.

So I want to just pick out four phrases from our readings that should encourage us to rejoice in God: a bride, a robe, a new name and an adopted son.

Firstly the bride. Isaiah speaks of a restoration that God will bring about, a time of rejoicing, because "He has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a **bride** adorns herself with her jewels" (Isa. 61:10). He goes on to say "as a bridegroom rejoices over his **bride**, so will your God rejoice over you" (Isa. 62:5).

Surely we have a picture here of God and His bride, the church, which John sees in Revelation 21 "And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (Rev. 21:2). The similarity of imagery is striking. Paul picks up the same theme in Ephesians. "Husbands love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless" (Eph. 5:25-27).

God rejoices over the people of God "as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride" (Isa. 62:5). Many of the modern Christian songs are dismissed by some men as too girly, too much like Jesus is my boyfriend. Well, let all men contemplate this phrase. God rejoices over you as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride. Men you remember your wedding day, when you set eyes on your wife coming down the aisle, wow, this is the girl I'm going to marry, she looks fantastic and she is going to be my wife! In the same way God looks at you, rejoices over you and says I love you, I want you to be with me through all eternity. Let the truth of God's love touch you this morning. It comes as no surprise therefore that Christians are called the beloved of God. Paul says in Colossians "Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and **beloved**, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience" (Col. 3:12) and again in his second letter to the Thessalonians "But we ought

always to give thanks to God for you, brothers **beloved** by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth” (2 Thess. 2:13). “As a bridegroom rejoices over his **bride**, so will your God rejoice over you” (Isa. 62:5).

Secondly the robe. Not only, in Christ do we receive forgiveness of sins, but we are clothed in the righteousness of Christ, “a robe of his righteousness”, like the golden head covering the priest wore or the jewels that adorn the bride (Isa. 61:10). Paul in Philippians 3 explains it this way “that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, **the righteousness from God** that depends on faith” (Phil. 3:8-9).

Charles Wesley grasped this in his hymn “And can it be”, where he writes:
No condemnation now I dread,
Jesus and all in Him is mine!
Alive in Him, my living Head,
And clothed in righteousness Divine.

Thirdly, not only does God clothe us in Christ’s righteousness but He gives us a new name. Isaiah says “you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will give” (Isa. 62:2). Now names in Scripture are very important because they indicate something about the character of the person. So when God gives us a new name, He is giving us a new character or a new life. “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Cor. 5:17). Because Jesus was the perfect man, God wants to make all of us like Jesus. Not in some clone sense, not like a load of genetically engineered zombies. But He wants us to become the person Jesus would be if he lived in your house, if he did your job, if he lived in your street. None of us can ever approach the breadth of person that Jesus was, but each us are meant to be a reflection of Jesus in our own place and together, as the people of God, we become God’s handiwork, His work of art. God gives us a new name and fills us with His Spirit to bring forth the life of His Son in us who believe.

And the fourth phrase appears in our reading from Galatians (Gal. 4:4-7) and it also appears in Romans (8:15) - adopted as sons of God. The Greek word is *huiiothesia*, and means securing a son by adoption. It happened among the elite in Roman society; several of the Roman emperors were adopted sons, chosen by their adopted fathers. This is the word that Paul uses to describe what God has done in welcoming us into His family, so we can call God, “Daddy”. For many of us this closeness with God is something we have only begun to grasp. No one is ever adopted by chance. If you are a Christian, then you are adopted by the deliberate choice of God because he loves you.

As Christians we can call God, Abba, which means ‘my own dear Father’, the very word that Jesus used. Simon Ponsonby calls this the revolutionary truth of the gospel, that sets Christianity apart from every other religion. (I am indebted to Simon for much of this section on the adopted child.)

So why are we to rejoice in the Lord? We have but scratched the surface this morning. He rejoices over us as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, He has given us a robe of righteousness, a new name, and He has adopted us as sons. As I was thinking about this yesterday I was reminded of C.S. Lewis’ book “The Screwtape Letters”, where he brilliantly contrasts the generous heart of God and the scheming heart of Satan, or the Devil, who is behind all lesser gods. God wants servants who can finally become sons while the Devil wants humans who can finally become food; God wants to give out but the Devil wants to suck in; God is full and flows over while the Devil is empty and wants to be filled (p38). What a contrast! Let us rejoice in the overflowing, generous heart of the Lord, our God.

Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven, who like me His praise should sing?
Amen? Amen.