

Joy to the World? - Christmas Day 2023

Date: Christmas Day, 2023

Location: St George's Battery Point

Texts: Luke 2:1-20; Titus 3.3-8a; Micah 4:1-3

Joy to the World. That is our theme for Christmas this year. We might see it in the faces of our kids as they open presents. Or as your family sits around the table to feast. Unless, of course, your trip on your way from the kitchen and the Christmas pudding and custard fly through the air in slow motion before splattering with gelatinous grace across the wide eyed faces of your assembled guests.

We don't need to look to comedy to know that Christmas joy is not guaranteed. I'm sure you've each got your own Christmas disaster story. Columnist Paul Daley, in *The Guardian* this week, writes bleakly,

... joy feels as elusive as a Tassie tiger right now. It is a unicorn. A needle in a haystack. I know I'm not at all alone when I say that, this year, finding joy feels almost impossible.

The very notion of joy raises so many burning questions right now. Can we experience it? (By can, I mean, is it even psychologically/emotionally realisable when the world is so broken? ...

I'm asking for friends. Yes really. Friends gripped by the ennui that comes from observing, yet again, that there is no bottom line when it comes to man's inhumanity to man.¹

It's a fair question. We see that brokenness in so many ways, near and far. This Christmas I'm particularly conscious of the war in Gaza, so close to Bethlehem the place of Jesus' birth. The cruelty of Hamas. The ongoing devastation brought upon the Palestinians by the IDF. Perhaps the image for this Christmas is not a jolly Santa, or a quaint nativity scene, but this painting entitled "Scene of the Massacre of Innocents" by Leon Cogniet. It's taken from Matthew's gospel where the enraged king Herod, finding his power threatened by the newborn king orders all infant boys in Bethlehem and surrounds killed. It's a scene that evokes the reality of a world of power and violence and self interest into which Christ was born. The same world in which we live. Where is joy to be found in this world?

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<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/dec/19/christmas-joy-feels-more-elusive-than-ever-look-for-quiet-contemplation-instead>



Scene of the Massacre of Innocents, Leon Cogniet, 1824 (Public Domain)

Paul Daley's answer:
 "Best in these circumstances, I often think, to look to the universe – the stars and the moon – for comfort. ... [and] know that the universe is bigger, more

meaningful, than the globe with all its determination to destroy itself." And I ask Paul, really? Yes the universe is bigger than our broken and divided world, but is it more meaningful? Says who? And what is that meaning? And where is the comfort in this?

Paul's starting point is atheism. That there is no God and as such that the material world is all there is. We are alone in the universe and so must wring out of the world what joy we can find. This is not joy *to* the world. It's joy *from* the world. We can of course attempt this. Wringing joy from a cold world through entertainment, the pursuit of pleasure and peak experiences. We may be more civically minded and try to bring joy to others, to make the world a better place. But I wonder whether in the end the joy we might wrest from the broken shards of this world come only because we impose our will upon it. We attempt to create the world as we think it should be, but invariably this comes at the expense of others. And that in the end leaves us alone or in endless conflict with those who don't see the world as we do.

What we need is joy not *from* the world but *to* the world, joy come from outside the world. We need joy that is beyond our power. Joy that is given and can only be received. We need Joy that can shine through despair and sorrow, not denying their existence, or insulating us from them, but a joy that burns brighter, is deeper and stronger, joy that endures.

This is what Christmas offers: the joy of heaven, to earth come down. No less than the Son of God, wrapped in the clothes of our humanity, humble and lying in an animal feeding trough. How could this helpless babe be the source of eternal joy?

In our enlightened sophistication we dismiss the Christmas story as a fairytale. We put Jesus on par with Santa. A nice story for the kids but something we can't believe as adults.

But why? Have we really examined the evidence? Do we dismiss it because it challenges our freedom and autonomy, our sense that we're masters of our own destiny, that we can do whatever we want so long as it doesn't harm others? Are these not just other ways of saying my own will and way, where I am at the centre and world and everyone in it must bend to me?

There is no violence in Cogniet's painting. It's offstage. Implied by the woman running with her children tucked under her arms. And the haunting face of the woman in Cogniet's painting looks at us, as if to say, are you one of Herod's minions? Here to make the world in your image?

Why couldn't the Christmas story be true? And don't we secretly want it to be true? That there is a joy beyond the walls of this world that will bring peace and justice, that will heal our wounds and bind up the broken hearted?

In his essay on Fairy Stories, Tolkien says that essential to all fairy stories is the "eucatastrophe", the good catastrophe, or happy ending.

"The consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the happy ending; or more correctly of the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous "turn" (for there is no true end to any fairy-tale): this joy, which is one of the things which fairy-stories can produce supremely well, is not essentially "escapist," nor "fugitive." In its fairy-tale -- or otherworld -- setting, it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of dyscatastrophe, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is evangelium, [gospel, good news] giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief."²

² J.R.R. Tolkien, 'On Fairy Stories', 1947

Tolkien asks, what if fairy stories, with their “good catastrophes”, their sudden joyous turns, what if they point to the true myth, the gospel of Jesus, where joy does indeed come from beyond the walls of this world?

The angels said to the shepherds,

Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.
Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. (Luke 2:10-11)

The message of Christmas is this: There is good news of great joy for all people. What is that news? That a Saviour has been born to you, he is Christ the Lord. We need not be afraid. Yes, he is the Lord. He does claim our allegiance. Yes, he calls us to get down off the throne of our hearts and cast our crowns before him. Yes, he does call us to die to ourselves and submit to his rule as our king. Yes, he does say you will only find perfect freedom in my service. Yes, our vision of what the world should be must die and give way to his. Yes, we must follow his way and not our own to bring about his kingdom of peace and justice. But this Lord is also our Saviour. He is the light of the world, shining in darkness. He comes to carry our sorrow, and console us in our grief. He comes to bind up the brokenhearted. He comes to reconcile us to God and our neighbour. He comes to save us from ourselves. He comes to bring mercy in a world of judgement. He comes to bring forgiveness where all we hear is the voice of condemnation. He comes to show us the way of peace.

Joy to the World. The Lord is come. The question is, will you receive him as your king? There is joy this Christmas, but not what we can conjure up in a broken world. Jesus brings joy from beyond the walls of this world because he is Emmanuel, God come to live with us. We'd be forgiven for seeing in Cogniet's painting Mary and Jesus. The child does seem to glow as all Christ child's do in art. He suggests to us that it's to this world of power and violence that Jesus did indeed come. We are not alone in the cosmos. God has come down to live with us. Our humanity is not overcome with inhumanity, because God himself has come to redeem our humanity from the inside out. Joy to the world! The Lord is come. Will you prepare him room in your heart, so that you can know his joy? Christ the Saviour is born. Joy has come. So let us join with the angels and sing his praise.