

Readings: Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Luke 2:1-14

“It’s like a smile all over my body.” That’s how one grandma described the birth of her grandchild.

Dr Susan Crowther, a senior lecturer at Auckland university with 20 years experience as a midwife, came to the same conclusion. She wrote:

“The joy at birth is amazing, thrilling and immensely moving for everyone. In my own research I found that joy at birth overwhelms us all. This is seen in our tears of joy, hairs on the back of our neck standing up in awe, often leaving us speechless and overcome with emotion. It was not just mothers and their families but midwives and doctors who told stories of how they felt privileged to be at a birth.

The feeling in the room, wherever and however a baby is born, is like no other. One midwife in the study put it like this, “Birth is just lovely, I love the world when I drive home from a birth” .

Tonight/today a child is born to us and Luke the Gospel writer gives us the greeting of the angels, “Do not be afraid, for see I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.”

We gather tonight/today just as millions will across our world to hear again the news that the Saviour has been born to us. (We gather in the middle of the night because that is the traditional time Jesus was born and because candles are more fun in the dark.)

The Bible readings echo Dr Susan's feelings. Some 600 years before Jesus birth Isaiah wrote, “ … You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy. They rejoice before you, as with joy at the harvest.”

And the Psalm for today proclaims, “O sing to the Lord a new song. Let the heavens rejoice and the earth be glad, let the seas roar and the paddocks exult, then all the trees of the forest will sing for joy.”

Sometimes we forget that at the heart of Christmas, indeed at the heart of being a Christian, is plain and simple joy.

When the very first sermon was preached on Christmas Day in Aotearoa 204 years ago the text that Samuel Marsden chose was, “Behold I bring you tidings of great joy.” He had a unique preaching technique. He had a chief standing with a stick and anyone who whispered or dozed off got a hit over the head!

When it came time for the newly elected Pope Francis to write his first message to the world what did he chose to write? He wrote a book entitled “The Joy of the Gospel.”

We can find it hard to be joyous. We try and do joy with our heads but you do joy with your heart. To be sure, joy is different from happiness. Happiness comes and goes but joy comes and stays. It doesn’ t come with wealth, or success, rather it comes as a gift of the Spirit.

This is the gift that Jesus holds out to each of us tonight/today. It's an unconditional gift. We don’ t have to do anything to earn it.

Joy is what keeps us motivated here at St Peter’ s. The joy of music is shared by the choir, our orchestra, and Mainly Music. The joy of friendship is shared at Coffee and Chat, walking group, exercise class, English class and youth group. The joy of people’ s lives transformed is shared at Petersgate Counselling Centre. We share the joy of opening our Preschool next year and the joy of work beginning on the restoration of St Peters.

Indigenous cultures can teach us about joy.

When a woman in certain African tribes knows she is pregnant she goes out into the wilderness with a few friends and together they pray until they hear the song of joy of the child. Then they return to the tribe and teach it to everyone else. When the child is born the community gathers and sings and dances the child's song. Later when that child starts school - the village gathers and sings and dances that child's song. When the child passes through to adulthood they gather to sing and dance. At the marriage the person will hear and sing their song. And finally when the soul is about to pass from this world - you guessed it - they gather to sing and to dance that person's song. They sing and dance them into the next life.

There's one other occasion when they gather to sing to the child. If at any time they commit a crime or make a major mistake the individual is called into the centre of the village. Then the community forms a circle around them and they sing and dance their song to them. They echo Jesus' words of forgiveness and the tribe recognises that it is not in punishment that people find their way but in being reminded of who they are, their God-given identity - because when you know your song you have no desire to hurt another.

Those who love you are not fooled by your dark image of yourself but they remind you that you are made in beauty. When you feel ugly, they remind you that you are made in wholeness. When you feel broken, they remind you that you are made in innocence. When you feel guilty, they remind you that you are made for a purpose.

If we have forgotten joy we have forgotten who we are and we feel lost and alone. But to reclaim our song is to reclaim our joy in God.

Tonight/today we, Jesus' family, gather to make a song and dance at his birth. His birth is an invitation to find joy. To reclaim our joy in God takes little steps but that joy will come if we allow it. This Christ child born to us will become for us "a smile all over our body."