



Today we light the third candle on our Advent Ring. The first is one for Hope – hope is like a light shining in a dark place and we celebrate the hope we have in Jesus Christ. The second candle is for Peace – one of the things we hope and long for and it remind us that Jesus is the Prince of Peace. This third candle is for Joy. Just as the birth of Jesus gave great joy to his mother, so His presence in the world gave joy to those who had none before. He healed them, loved them, challenged them and gave them hope and peace when they believed in him. He can and will do the same for us. Our hope, peace and joy all come from and through the love of God

**Let us pray:** Thank you God for the joy you give us. We ask that as we wait for all your promises to come true, and for Christ to come again, that we might be conscious of your presence with us now. Help us today and every day to worship you, to hear your word, and to do your will by sharing your joy with each other. We ask it in the name of the one who was born in Bethlehem. Amen.

We come together to worship the Lord and the Spirit unites us wherever we are.

**Hymn StF 173 Into the darkness of this world** Maggi Dawn <https://youtu.be/qXKOxub5obc>

Into the darkness of this world;  
Into the shadows of the night;  
Into this loveless place You came,  
Lightened our burdens, eased  
our pain  
And made these hearts Your  
home.  
Into the darkness once again,  
Oh come, Lord Jesus, come

**Chorus**

*Come with Your love  
to make us whole.  
Come with Your light  
to lead us on.  
Driving the darkness  
far from our souls.  
O come, Lord Jesus, come.*

Into the longing of our souls;  
Into these heavy hearts of stone;  
Shine on us now Your piercing  
light,  
Order our lives and souls aright  
By grace and love unknown.  
Until in You our hearts unite,  
Oh come, Lord Jesus, come.

**Chorus**

*Come with Your love  
to make us whole.  
Come with Your light  
to lead us on.  
Driving the darkness  
far from our souls.  
O come, Lord Jesus, come.*

Till all the earth declares Your  
praise,  
And Your great mercies own.  
Now let Your love be born in us,  
O come, Lord Jesus, come.

**Last Chorus**

*Come in Your glory  
take Your place.  
Jesus, the Name above all names.  
we long to see You face to face,  
O come, Lord Jesus, come*

O Holy Child, Emmanuel;  
Hope of the ages, God with us,  
Visit again this broken place

**Song:** SofFellowship 298 <https://youtu.be/hraGOLcS2hc>

Jesus Name above all names, beautiful Saviour, glorious Lord;  
Emmanuel, God is with us, blessed Redeemer, Living Word.

Joy is a word which has been in short supply this year. How could we feel joyful throughout probably the most difficult, upsetting, worrying, uncertain, painful time and, for so many, a time when there has been an acute sense of loss? Where is Jesus is all of that and what has happened to our faith? Have we been able to stay resolute and strong or have we fallen behind. Perhaps our faith, our hope and our joy has dimmed a little during this very difficult and unsettling year. I found an inspiring quote recently 'I don't walk with God – I can't keep up with Him. He walks with me and waits for me every time I fall behind'. Maybe you and I have fallen behind a little but God waits for us to catch up.

What is joy? When I was in Sunday School many years ago I remember a saintly teacher saying that joy means Jesus and You with nothing in between, but sometimes, without necessarily realising it, we can allow things to come between us. However for some of us those things can actually bring us closer to Him than ever because God IS with us whatever is happening and His love is eternal.

**Psalm 126** says 'The Lord has done great things for us and we are filled with joy'

**Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11** spells out the Good News to come when God will rescue His people bringing joy and healing. Advent is a time full of mystery and a time of watching and waiting, a time of deep longing, a time for us to realize afresh that Christmas was God's big surprise. Even though there had been tantalising clues all through the Old Testament, no one really expected the miracle of 'God-with-us' to be in the form of a helpless baby. The Christmas story is about God's surprising gift to us: a gift that not only transforms the way we think about our faith, ourselves and the future, but also one that gives us an amazing insight into the very nature and depth of the love God has for us.

I was brought up in a Christian home and will be forever grateful for that but I had to make a decision for myself. I asked Jesus to come into my heart while I was at primary school not realising at the time just how He would impact the whole of my life and, although I wandered away from Him in my teenage years, He never left me and gently brought me back. I had always been familiar with John 3:16 'For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son....' It took me a very long time to realise that God loved **me** so much that He gave...' I had seen God as being very stern, sitting on a cloud just out of my reach holding a big stick ready to rap my knuckles when I got things wrong. I remember sitting in Bible Studies with Donald English when he talked about the extravagantly generous love of God, a love that never changes and encompasses all. I discovered His love in my own life and dared to believe that it was true for me. It was in the extraordinarily mysterious birth of the baby born in Bethlehem that we see the wondrous love God has for those He created, love for each one of us which can surely prompt a joy deep within our heart and soul that doesn't depend on what is happening in our own lives and, in a sometimes scary, world around us.

In **Luke's gospel** chapter 1 we read of the joy that both Elizabeth, and the baby in her womb, felt when they met with a pregnant Mary, and again the joy bubbling up deep within Mary's soul when she dared to believe the impossible – that God could use a humble village girl like her in a miraculous and wonderful way. Both of these women faced great sadness and trauma in their later lives and it's hard to imagine what that would have been like but they were both filled with the Holy Spirit and experienced and celebrated His power and strength within. How about you?

I invite you to take a moment to reflect on this past year – what were the good moments? Moments when you felt the joy of the Lord, moments you can thank and praise God for. I invite you to write them down - they may surprise you.

God became flesh and blood in Jesus Christ to show His extravagantly generous love – can you truly believe He did it for you?

God is Lord of all time and He sees everything from the beginning and into eternity and yet He still meets each one of us in the here and now. In your watching and waiting during Advent can find those quiet moments when you can truly be aware of His presence with you, loving you, holding you in His hands, comforting you and challenging you and bringing joy?

Lord, you never force us to believe in you. You don't make us praise you. You won't command us to love you. But instead, *you invite us to come.*

Lord, you don't deliberately wait out of sight, You don't always hide and leave us guessing. You don't just hope we'll notice you.

But instead, *you invite us to come because you are closer than the very air we breathe*

Lord, you took such a great risk for us. You made the first move. Lord, you opened the door first. You made it all possible..

Lord, *you invite us to come. We must decide for ourselves.*

Lord come with your love to make us whole, come with your light to lead us on. Come in your glory take your place. Amen.

This song was written early on in the first lockdown by Keith Getty and friends and it always brings joy to my soul as it reminds me again what my faith is all about and where my hope and joy come from.

What is our hope in life and death?  
Christ alone, Christ alone  
What is our only confidence?  
That our souls to Him belong  
Who holds our days within His hand?  
What comes, apart from His command?  
And what will keep us to the end?  
The love of Christ, in which we stand

*Chorus*  
*O sing hallelujah!*  
*Our hope springs eternal*  
*O sing hallelujah!*  
*Now and ever we confess*  
*Christ our hope in life and death*

What truth can calm the troubled soul?  
God is good, God is good  
Where is His grace and goodness known?  
In our great Redeemer's blood  
Who holds our faith when fears arise?  
Who stands above the stormy trial?  
Who sends the waves that bring us nigh  
Unto the shore, the rock of Christ?

*Chorus*

Unto the grave, what will we sing?  
"Christ, He lives; Christ, He lives!"  
And what reward will heaven bring?  
Everlasting life with Him  
There we will rise to meet the Lord  
Then sin and death will be destroyed  
And we will feast in endless joy  
When Christ is ours forevermore

*Chorus - repeat*

*Now and ever we confess*  
*Christ our hope in life and death*

May the God who gives us peace make you holy in every way and keep your whole being – spirit, soul, and body free from every fault at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you will do it, because He is faithful.

**1 Thess 5:3-4**

