

## **Prayers for Peace, Hope and Justice**

When I think of joy, there are 2 different sorts of thoughts that come to mind. Joy is the smell of the hot, soaked ground after a summer's rain shower, and of a puppy's breath. It's hearing your favourite piece of classical music played on the radio, or the song of a rare bird, or your son or daughter say I love you. It's seeing the delight on a child's face when they receive a special gift they've longed for, or watching whales in the distant sea breaching and smacking their tails, having the best game. It's eating milk tart that tastes just the like the one your granny used to make. It's holding the hand of a loved one.

But joy is also something else, something deep within us, regardless of circumstances. Something mystical that is a part of who we are when we rest in the goodness of God.

In October last year, 2 weeks after the war broke out in Gaza, I led this Candle prayer, praying for the children of war. Now, 14 months later, as we make the Christmas journey towards Bethlehem, let me take you there again, as we pray for a world at war.

“Do not be afraid, for I bring you good news of great joy, which will be for all the people”. Words spoken 2000 years ago on a hillside that has now most likely been decimated in conflict. Joy for *all* the people. But it seems that the world has decided that it must be joy for some, and not for others. And so, God of *all*, while we put up Christmas trees decorated with festive colour, we remember others living in places where trees, gardens and natural beauties have been destroyed by bombs, where colour cannot be seen through the dust that never settles as the fighting continues. While we sing carols, and listen to silly songs about reindeer and snowmen, others sing songs of lament, and wail at the loss of loved ones. While we enjoy the smells of good food wafting through our kitchens, others smell gunpowder, and death, all around them. While we share extravagant meals together, others scrounge for any morsel of food, hoping it won't be a boobytrap that will explode as they pick it up. While we put up Christmas lights to twinkle at night, others only see the light of gunfire, airstrikes and exploding bombs. While we give each other gifts, others are grateful for the precious gift of just still being alive. While we sit comfortably here today, preparing our hearts, minds and souls for the birth of a holy child in Bethlehem, others mourn the loss of their babies, and children, who will never have the chance to just be children. We lift all of these others to you now, all of these, our sisters and brothers, who have been robbed of so many joys.

God of *all*, we pray too for those who have taken the joy from them. We wonder what kind of childhood they had. Were they not assured of their belovedness? Were they excluded, humiliated, traumatised, when all they wanted was to be loved and affirmed? From what pain did they come to reach this place of thinking that another's humanity doesn't matter?

Into *all* of this pain, we pray for a renewal in God's love...for joy. We perhaps cannot fully comprehend what it means to have joy in the kind of suffering of war - it may seem unreachable - but we are thankful for this mystery of grace. We pray for a defiant joy in

the chaos and turbulence, that it may be a resistance to those trying to seize it, and that it may offer liberation in some way. May they know joy while the wounds are being inflicted, by trusting in a Love deeper than our imaginations. May they rest in the Arms of the good, and true, and beautiful, as these may be the only Arms that can help them bear the darkness. And while feeling joy doesn't eliminate the pain and terror, it does offer a soft and soothing balm for turmoiled souls.

Oh God, it is so hard to hear you now in Bethlehem, perhaps as it was 2000 years ago? But we pray that it might become harder *not* to hear you. As you tiptoe through the rubble of war, may your children there know your presence, and hear your voice. May they know their preciousness, and hear that they are beloved, and beautiful, and that they belong. May they know that although this is their time of grief, one day they will rejoice again, and no-one will take away their joy.  
Amen.

Let's pray together for those in war-torn parts of our world:  
God bless Africa and all the world.  
Guard our children.  
Guide our leaders.  
And give us peace.  
Amen.