

Epiphany 3, 23rd January 2011 – Joy Part 1

Readings: Psalm 27: 1, 4-9, Isaiah 9: 1-4, 1 Corinthians 1: 10-18, Matthew 4: 12-23

“Now my head is lifted up above my enemies all around me, and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing and make melody to the Lord.”

If you were here a few weeks ago you might remember that I mentioned – or perhaps warned might be a better way to put it – that I intended to focus a bit on joy in coming weeks. I said that and afterwards someone came up to me and said, ‘when are you going to talk about joy, I really want to know’ and I said, well I’m not preaching again until the 23rd so probably then, and so here I am.

You know what it’s like when you back yourself into a corner. You say you’re going to do something and it doesn’t seem like much at the time and then when it comes time to deliver ... So I’m going to talk about joy this morning and that’s a bit tough because quite frankly January hasn’t been the most joyful month so far at St Luke’s. I’ve done a couple of weddings, yes, and they were lovely, but mostly this month’s been all about funerals, and sadly most of those funerals have been for people we know, and while we talk a lot at funerals about celebrating this person’s life, they’re still quite sombre occasions, so joy, I feel, has been a bit in short supply around here lately.

Post-funeral blues aren’t the only reason I slightly regret my promise though. The more I looked at joy the more obvious it became to me that this is a risky theme, there is much room for misunderstanding and upset here. I don’t want someone going home and saying ‘Brian said we have to always be happy.’ So it started to look like anything I said would need to be said very carefully and unpacked in great detail, and that would take a lot of time, and quite frankly it all started to look a lot like hard work, but I had said I would do this ... It took me a while, I have to admit, but finally I started to realise that what I was doing was falling straight into the trap that I was worried I might lead others into. What was happening was that I was getting so focused on joy – what it is, what it means, and where we might find it – that I forgot that the whole point of joy is that joy is not the point, and what finally reminded me of that was reading today’s psalm.

I am a big fan of the psalms. If you’re not a regular reader of the psalms I highly recommend them, because in the psalms is where we find the rawest, the most honest, the most human passages in the Bible. Among the other quotes on my office wall is one from Rabbi Allan Mendelbaum who said that the “psalms are an inventory of the state of the soul.” The psalms come from the psalmists’ guts. They are feelings set to music, and occasionally pain laid out in poetry. Some psalms tell stories, but their point is not the stories they tell but the way they tell them, which brings us to Psalm 27.

“The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?”

This is an incredible Psalm. In it we find lament and praise and question and trust, and right at its heart is the verse I quoted a few minutes ago: “Now my head is lifted up above my enemies all around me, and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing and make melody to the Lord.”

“I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy”. Why? What does this psalmist, probably David, have to be joyful about? In the verses we don’t hear today we discover that the psalmist has ‘evildoers’ assailing him “to devour” his flesh, an army encamped against him, and war looming on the horizon, and yet he stands in God’s tent and offers sacrifices with shouts of joy?

In Isaiah we find references to Naphtali and Zebulun, the same region Jesus goes to in the Gospel, and the prophet describes the people of these lands rejoicing before God “as with joy at the harvest.” Yet these are lands that when Isaiah is writing are already in the hands of the Assyrian army, and within a few more years the whole of Israel would follow, and when the Assyrians were finally moved on another occupying force would take their place, and another, and another ... Where, we have to ask, is the joy in that?

In Matthew today’s reading begins with the news of John’s arrest and Jesus withdrawing to Galilee, quite possibly to escape Herod’s jurisdiction and avoid the same thing happening to him, and then he begins to preach a message of repentance just like John’s before calling Simon and Andrew from their living to an uncertain and almost assuredly difficult life, so again, where is the joy in that?

And in the epistle Paul describes the divisions between the Christians in Corinth and the infighting and conflict they’re causing, and he reminds them that to most “the message of the cross is foolishness”, and yet that’s the message we proclaim. So where is the joy in that?

I may well return to Paul and joy another time, because Paul is the one who really develops this theme, but this time I’m making no promises. For now I just want to sit with that question for a time; where’s the joy? Where’s the joy in our world? Where’s the joy in our communities? Where’s the joy in our church? Where’s the joy in our lives?

Are we, as Paul will go on to exhort, a joyful people? Do we “rejoice as with joy at the harvest”?

In Paul’s writing joy is always accompanied by grace, and that’s what I might pick up on another time, but in the Hebrew scriptures – in Isaiah, the psalms and elsewhere – what accompanies joy is much more specific:

“One thing I asked of the Lord, that I will seek after: to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple.”

While Paul places joy in the spotlight, in the Old Testament joy is simply a byproduct. In Isaiah joy is promised as a response to what God will accomplish. In Nehemiah joy is the substance that makes up God’s strength. In Jeremiah joy is reserved for God alone, and only – and here’s the key – only God can be the source of true joy.

I’m grateful to Jim Young who lent me a small book by H.A. Williams called ‘The Joy of God’. Small but dense, I admit it took some effort to read, but it was worth the effort because what Williams touches on is the great truth in this quest to somehow grasp hold

of joy, and he encapsulates that truth in the title of the book itself, because ultimately what we find in scripture is that all joy is of God.

Williams writes: "If in the first instance the Joy of God is God Himself, then in a secondary sense the Joy of God is God's gift of the Joy which is Himself both to us and to his whole creation."

"One thing I asked of the Lord, that I will seek after: to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life".

The more I studied this thing called joy, the more I tried to explain or quantify it in some meaningful way, the more I began to realise that I was missing the point. Joy is not the goal, God is the goal. Joy is God's gift to all creation, but as with any gift it needs to be recognised. While for Paul joy and grace go hand in hand, in the Hebrew scriptures joy is simply what's there when God shows up. From and through the presence of God joy is a reality independent of all else around it. That's why at so many points in the Bible we find people rejoicing in the most appalling of circumstances. That's why, in the years since, God's people have done the same. Think of the martyrs singing as they walked to their deaths, Francis rejoicing in the midst of poverty, Christians singing hymns in German concentration camps, and one of the most amazing examples for me, Archbishop Desmond Tutu roaring with laughter and dancing despite the struggles of himself and his people in South Africa. God shows up and joy comes too.

To know Jesus and make Jesus known is our diocesan mission statement. Making Jesus known is the challenge set before us, but I'm convinced that to know Jesus is our first and most pressing calling. To know Jesus, to become fully aware of God's presence in our lives, from and through that comes joy.

"Come," my heart says, "seek his face!" Your face, Lord, do I seek."

We need to seek God's face, we need to seek it and in finding it we will find our joy, and having discovered God's presence, having found that joy, then we must take that presence and that joy into the world, but that's another sermon maybe.