

Giving Review Sunday

Philippians 3:1-14; Matthew 5:1-12 'Be joyful'

Opening Prayer

O come let us sing to the Lord, let us heartily rejoice in the rock of our salvation, and as we rejoice in the gift of Jesus, may our hearts be set on fire with love for God, now and forever. Amen.

Introduction

This is "To be or not to be? Part 4". The fourth in our series about making choices, with the theme "To be or not to be joyful".

God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us (Rom 5:5). What is our response?

Is it to trust in God when everything looks as though it is going well? Is it to rejoice in God even though things go terribly wrong? Is it both?

I wonder what choice you make about joy. To be or not to be joyful. That is the question today!

What is joy?

After I spoke about joy in an evening service I was asked "what does joy look like?" I wonder what you think joy looks like. **[Ask]**

My reply was that joy looks like Desmond Tutu, because he is the personification of joy in our generation. If we want to see joy, then we can look at Archbishop Desmond. In April this year, His Holiness the Dalai Lama described Archbishop Desmond as the [image of joy](#) when they met to start writing a book together - a book on joy!

So what is this gift of joy that Archbishop Desmond has?

Rejoice in the Lord!

To help us with this series on choices we are exploring Paul's letter to the Philippians, which is itself described as the epistle of joy! Unlike many of Paul's letters to other churches, Philippians is not packed full of theology or moral teaching, it is much more an outpouring of love and gratitude from the apostle to his favourite congregation who loved him dearly. It's all about their partnership and about what a relationship with Christ is like. Joy!

Paul encourages his brothers and sisters to "Rejoice in the Lord!" (Phil 3:1) and then "Rejoice in the Lord and again I say rejoice!" (Phil 4:4). Amidst the trials and tribulations of life in prison, Paul had many good reasons for not being particularly happy about his situation, but he chose to be joyful in the Lord always.

What has struck me about Archbishop Desmond is that he has made the same choice, to be joyful. As the first black Archbishop of Cape Town, he challenged the horror and inhumanity of apartheid South Africa that was all around, and declared that those backing apartheid as a political system had already lost, because Jesus Christ had come to save us and had shown us that God is a God of righteousness and justice. Therefore the evil of apartheid and injustice had lost because it had been defeated on the cross, and it was just a matter of time before the system fell. And so it was.

This same passion fills St Paul. Everything else is rubbish, his identity, his education, his lawful behaviour. All worthless. "I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead." (Phil 3:10-11). Whenever I read this passage, I am reminded of Les Jeapes, because it was his favourite passage in the bible, and it is fundamental. It is radical.

The message of Paul to his dearest friends was that everyone, even if they have excellent reasons why not, can be joyful in the Lord always. Those who grasp this will experience a new depth in their relationship with God. They will have a new life.

Today is also ALMA Sunday, when we celebrate the partnership in the gospel between the Anglican Churches in Angola, London and Mozambique. The ALMA covenant starts with these words:

“Grace and peace to you from God our Father
and the Lord Jesus Christ.
I thank my God every time I remember you.
In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy
because of your partnership in the gospel
from the first day until now, being confident of this,
that he who began a good work in you
will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil 1: 2-6)

It seems to me that Paul’s phrase “I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel” is key to understanding joy. It suggests that joy involves a three-way relationship.

We know that Joy is one of the spiritual gifts. To have joy we can choose to want it and pray for this gift, and if God gives it to us we then just have to share it with others. We can’t stop ourselves. Joy just bubbles up out of us, as it does from Archbishop Desmond. So there are always three parties involved in joy: God who gives it, the person who has it, and the one with whom they share it. Joy and partnership in the gospel are closely connected.

Tonight in St Paul's Cathedral, Rachel Treweek, Bishop of Gloucester, will preside over our diocesan celebration of partnership in the gospel. Bishop Mark and five other brothers and sisters in Christ from Mozambique will be present. I am confident the cathedral will be full of joy as we worship God with them.

"Make my joy complete by being like-minded" says Paul (Phil 2:2) "having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind" as Jesus. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus (Phil 2:5).

What did Jesus have to say about joy?

Our gospel reading was of the introduction to what we call the Sermon on the Mount, when Matthew first records a major chunk of Jesus' teaching. The Beatitudes are nine statements starting "blessed are ..." and ending with a call to: "Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." (Matt 5:12).

We aren't promised life will be easy. It isn't and it won't be. But we are promised blessings in situations which look rather like the ministry to which Jesus was called. Isaiah 61 and Luke 4 record he was anointed to proclaim good news to the poor. In the Beatitudes, it's as though Jesus is saying do what I do - it's what God wants - but watch out for the cross and be joyful.

Closing

Joy just has to be passed on. The joy of both Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama is infectious. Those who meet them are lifted out of themselves and up towards God. If you would like this gift of joy, either for the first time or to be refilled with joy, then please say Amen to this prayer.

Come Holy Spirit. Thank you for calling us to faith in the God who has showed us in Jesus how much he loves us, we ask that you will fill us with your gift of joy so that we may always be joyful in you, that others may see our joy comes from you, and that we may grow in relationship with you. Amen.

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen. (Ephesians 3:20-21)