

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
Jeremiah 8.18-9.1/*Psalm* 79/*I Timothy* 2.1-8/*Luke* 16.1-13
St. Paul's Church, Halifax
23 September 2007

On Sorrow

~Paul H. Friesen~

This past week someone asked me about today's readings—what did I think about them. I wrote her back an email with the heading 'no joy'. The reading from *Jeremiah* was hard to listen to; the *Psalm* was hard to repeat. And its all not made any easier by the fact that there are people in the world this morning—and some perhaps even here—who have felt the full weight of the tragedy and sorrow and longing for vengeance that colours our Scriptures for today.

Last Sunday's Gospel urged us to share in the joy that God feels at our approach to him. But the first words of today's first reading from the prophet *Jeremiah* begin with the words: 'My joy is gone.'¹ So we are invited again to think together—but this time about godly sorrow.

A few centuries ago Levi Yitzhak, the Rabbi of Berditchev, was asked 'which was the right way, that of sorrow or that of joy.' That is, he was asked if the best spiritual path was the path that mourned for something lost or the path that rejoiced in something possessed.

Being a wise Rabbi, he refused to be boxed in by the question but didn't let go of the subject: 'There are two kinds of sorrow and two kinds of joy....,' he said, '[The good kind of sorrow] is the honest grief of [one] who knows *what* he lacks. The same is true of joy...[One] who is truly joyful is like a man whose house has burned down, who feels his need deep in his soul and begins to build anew.'²

¹ *Jeremiah* 8.18. All biblical quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version* unless noted otherwise.

² In *Tales of the Hasidim*, ed. Martin Buber and trans. Olga Marx (New York: Schocken Books, 1947), vol. I, p.231.

In other words, godly joy and godly sorrow were different in his view—but different from each other in a surprising way.

This is the direction our Scriptures take us this morning. We might often feel as human beings that joy is good and sorrow is bad, but that isn't really the truth. Joy is bigger than happiness. It's much more than avoiding sadness. Likewise sorrow is bigger than unhappiness.

When it comes to joy, it's not that happiness with our circumstances, or the fulfillment of healthy desires, or seeing things go the way we feel they should go—well, it's not that these things don't matter. They do, and should. But for Christians true joy is bigger than that. It's certainly bigger than a genetic tendency to cheerfulness.

The same is true of genuine sorrow. It's not that unhappiness, or psychological depression, or difficult circumstances, or seeing our plans or desires set aside, don't matter—they should and do matter. But they shouldn't be confused with sorrow.

Joy and sorrow were related to each other as fundamental human experiences in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. Unfortunately there are many pieces of spiritual advice (some of them Christian books) that confuse joy and sorrow with lesser experiences. These might easily prevent us from entering into true joy and discourage us from experiencing sorrow when we need to, when God wants us to.

Advice like this might hold back generally cheerful folks from feeling the depths of joy God has intended for them. And similar poor advice can produce guilt in distressed or depressed or unhappy folks who can indeed truly feel godly joy in the midst of it all without flashing 'happy-Christian smiles'.

‘My joy is gone, grief is upon me.’ Here is the rare personal voice of the Prophet who has had to deliver so much bad public news in his life of ministry throughout many tragedies.

His sorrow is honest, godly sorrow, but not the so-called honesty of some politicians or movie stars who think that publicly revealing something about themselves automatically justifies what they’ve done. Jeremiah’s honesty reveals the source of his sorrow: the Lord, the king, seems to be absent from Zion, from Jerusalem. God is gone. And his honesty reveals the reason: God’s people have substituted pleasing but false images of God for the true God. They have pushed God out of their life, so God has withdrawn. So Jeremiah, according to the Rabbi, knows *what* is missing—God. This is true sorrow.

We begin to know this sorrow when a friend or a parent or a child dies, when a fellow creature, we confess as made in the image of God, leaves us behind.³ And as we grow we begin to feel the absence of God, whom we have been pushing away from us.

The prophet asks what we all ask—can’t a remedy be found in an obvious place? In his case it was Gilead, the famous healing centre in the land, known for its medicinal plants.⁴ But that can never be enough to heal true sorrow. In fact weeping itself can never be enough even to express true sorrow. ‘O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people.’⁵ For Jeremiah, the absence of God and the the invasion of his country and the death of his fellows were linked together. This was both the beginning of sorrow and its deepest expression. To say that God was gone was to tell the deepest truth.

³ See *Genesis* 1.27: ‘God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.’

⁴ See *Genesis* 37.25, about the caravan of Ishmaelites ‘coming from Gilead, with their camels carrying gum, balm and resin...’ See also *The Jewish Study Bible*, ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p.942: ‘[Gilead was] apparently a site where balm and other healing substances could be extracted from local plants.’

⁵ *Jeremiah* 9.1.

The *psalm* we have read together this morning gives full expression to the absence of God. God has vacated the temple, as it were, and the pagans have moved in as they often did in the history of Israel.

And when they did they smashed altars and set up their images of smaller gods, far too small to fill the temple. Here too the honest truth is sung or chanted—it is really the people who have driven God out. They left God’s presence long before God departed the temple.

When we talk about sorrow as God’s absence, of course, we are in a different place than ancient Israel. Christians confess that God is king over all the earth—that the Kingdom has moved forward from being a nation to embrace the world, as the prophets before Christ said. In fact it is dangerous to say that God is *in* or *with* this nation, but not the other. No nation is big enough to contain God—no nation can bar God from entry.

It is dangerous and sinful to say that this country or that is only the site of God’s presence; dangerous and sinful to say that any political state, whether it be the United States of America, or Canada, or Israel, or the United Kingdom or the European Union is God’s country or nation or coalition is God’s land and no other is. God’s people may fly different national flags in different places, and fight for different governments, but in the end the cross always dwarfs the flag. ‘No [one] can serve two masters,’ said Jesus.⁶

This is why St. Paul said to young Timothy: ‘I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings should be made for *everyone*, for kings and *all* who are in high positions...I desire, then, that in *every* place men should pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or argument.’⁷

⁶ Luke 16.13.

⁷ I Timothy 2.1-2, 8.

When we cry out for God's presence, we don't cry out for a little god to fill a little place. 'There is one God,' said Paul to Timothy, 'there is also one mediator between God and humankind...who gave himself a ransom for all.'⁸ We cry out for the maker of the universe to return. We cry out for Jesus Christ, redeemer of the world, to be present, to be known among his people. This is the cry of sorrow. It's a cry that is honest, that accepts responsibility for the divine absence experienced.

Can I return to the Rabbi of Berdichev again? What did he say about the man who had passed through sorrow into joy, from the destroyed house to the beginning of its rebuilding? 'Over every stone that is laid,' said the Rabbi, 'his heart rejoices.'

God is sovereign. We can't capture the divine presence with spiritual tricks, or new technology or a perfect programme. But we can invite God back into our lives and into our community in by owning true sorrow and opening our souls to true joy.

We are about to enter once again into the deepest joy of Christian worship, 'making Eucharist' (being translated 'giving thanksgiving') joining Jesus Christ at 'the Lord's Supper', with the hope of 'Holy Communion.' All three of these expressions, used by Anglicans around the world, testify to our longing for God's presence. Our sorrowing at God's absence, confessed in our confession of sin, can lead us into the joy of knowing God's presence in the sharing of the meal—God in our midst, not just in this life or that life.

We don't call for God's presence as some medieval Christians once did, thinking that the bread and wine on the table became the literal body and blood of Christ, and so as we ate the elements it guaranteed God's presence. God's presence cannot be commanded by us, by whatever magic we might imagine.

⁸ *1 Timothy 2.5-6*

We gather instead to give thanks for the promise of God's presence in God's creation, in this church, in this bread and wine and above all in our midst. The early church believed this, so much, that the Scriptures call us, God's worshippers, the 'body of Christ'. God can't offer to be more present to us than that that phrase suggests!

And so we don't turn aside sorrow, for it is true sorrow that makes room in our hearts for welcoming true joy. This is the teaching of Christ, and so it is the teaching of the Scriptures, and so it is the teaching of the church.

How should we think about this today, and in the coming weeks? We have already welcomed Christ into our midst at the entrance to our Parish House. And we have been doing so in worship. But I would like to suggest we think about God's presence in two other ways. The first relates to our parish picnic, and the second relates to our parish plan.

Is it ridiculously pious to say we are looking for God at our parish picnic? Well, there are some ways of talking about this that seem spiritually shallow—even false. But when we talk to each other and look into each other's faces, we have the opportunity to find and share true, deep sorrow, and so make room to invite joy back in, to see God's presence. I'm not suggesting dramatic encounters and high emotion are necessary—but what an opportunity to be fully present to each other! A glance, a phrase, a hint from another, received by each other, might be the beginning of entering into another's sorrow, and so the beginning of the joy of God's presence.

Our Parish Plan—whatever you do when you receive it, look at the wonderful diagram. This puts God (and our worship of the Holy Trinity) at the centre of all that encircles it, and moves around it—the rest of our parish life and ministry. We are inviting God into our midst with this, and not boxing God into a formula or pushing God toward the door. And so there is the possibility of sorrow and the promise of joy as we look back and move forward.

Thanks be to God, that Christ carried our sorrows in his life and death.
And thanks be to God the great 'joy giver' who promises the divine presence to all communities that call upon his name.