

Advent 3 (B)
Isaiah 61.1-11/Psalm 126/I Thessalonians 5.16-24 /John 1.6-8; 19-28
St. Paul's Church, Halifax
14 December 2008

~Paul H. Friesen~

I've been thinking about happiness and unhappiness as this past week unfolded. Perhaps because our family had a bad microwave oven week (we're on our third since Monday)...Perhaps because of a conversation I had with a Siberian taxi cab driver about his year in Halifax...Perhaps because I've still got mud on my shoes from a funeral I conducted on Friday.

But I've also been thinking about joy.

This is Third Sunday of Advent, called *gaudete* Sunday in the church of our ancestors—an elegant label! But it's not complicated at all, because *gaudete* is simply the old European (Latin) word which we translate 'joy' or 'rejoice'. This is 'joy Sunday' in Advent.

In the church of our ancestors, the church that gave birth to Roman Catholicism, Protestantism and Anglicanism, the third Sunday in Advent was a joyful day. The colour switched from serious purple to deep pink to signal the Christian anticipation of Christmas, the celebration of the birth of Christ, God in our midst, pure joy.

So the church experienced a flash of joy in the midst of its Advent self-criticism. We would put it better if we said that the church experienced joy because judgement led to repentance and repentance to the experience of forgiveness. Even ordinations went ahead this week, though not in any other part of the penitential season of Advent.

So we shouldn't be surprised that today's scriptures are laced with joy.

'Rejoice always,' said St. Paul to the Thessalonians, 'pray with out ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances.'

And long before one of the poets of the *Psalms* put it this way: 'When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was full of laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy.'

There is a significant difference between happiness and joy, which is worth our attention today, right in the middle of Advent, half-way to Christmas, 2008.

I'm not going to suggest that happiness is unimportant or that joy is for super-spiritual folks. Nor can we say that joy is simply 'intense' happiness.

Joy is different. Joy is so different that it can catch us off guard. After all, C.S. Lewis entitled his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*.

Joy can catch us so off-guard we find it difficult to accept. If you've been following the parish lectionary this week, you might have noticed three stories in *The Gospel of Mark* that make this point.

A man is healed by Jesus, but his neighbours are so shocked by this change for the good that they beg Jesus to leave their community. And a woman is healed by Jesus, but when singled out she is overcome by trembling and fear. And Jesus' hometown neighbours are offended that someone they thought had a humble and tame and appropriate reputation would change their village for the good—without their permission.

Joy is real, so real that it disturbs things that should be disturbed, as well as assures things that out to be assured. This is perhaps joy's most obvious difference from happiness; it comes with emotion but it is far deeper than an emotion.

There are two unique characteristics of true joy if we look for it in today's Scriptures, and in our lives this week. *The first is the source of joy. And the second is its message.*

First, the source of true joy is God himself, our creator and redeemer.

Christians confess, as they worship, that God is the giver of all good gifts—and that God does not abandon them when good seems to have dried up, or when good does in fact dry up for a little while or even for a very long time.

And we confess these things because, in the end, it is God we are looking for, not God's gifts.

We know the moments on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day when the gifts give way to the people. We know the moments, that is, when the gifts fall into their rightful role as signs of the love of another human being. To confuse the price of a present with the love of a person would be tragic. Of course, the same is true with God and God's gifts.

God's gifts are very real, whether small or large, whether they are few in number or overwhelming in volume. *But it is God we are looking for.* It is a relationship that conveys joy, not just a hand that delivers a gift.

Perhaps this is why in Asian cultures gifts are always given to one another with two hands rather than one. Of course, this practice can be a ritual without meaning, but the ritual only points to the desire for a two-handed, whole-hearted giving that conveys something of the person along with the gift.

Joy has to do with who God is and who we are, and the relationship of these two.

Perhaps this is why John the Baptist was so quick and almost cheerful about who he was not: 'I am not the Messiah. I am not Elijah. I am not the prophet. I am not the light.'

And perhaps this why John the Baptist was quick to say that his whole being was wrapped up in his relationship to Jesus, the one whose way John prepared, the light to which he testified.

Joy has to do with who God is and who we are, and the relationship of the two.

Perhaps this is why the Psalmist pictures joy so close to his person as the clothes he wears.

'I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.'

Joy isn't a detachable component of life; it comes from a deep and growing appreciation of the God who created us and the God who loves us and the God who clothes us with a life to be lived in relationship with him and all those God has put around us.

The source of true joy is God himself, our creator and redeemer. Whenever we forget this we are like those who confuse a gift with its giver. Whenever we remember this gifts are put in their proper perspective, and we begin to enter into joy.

Joy will surprise us, but we can cultivate it by our spiritual disciplines, by entering deeper into our relationship with God as a parish and as worshippers—because the source of true joy is none less than God.

But there's a second thing: *the message of joy. Happiness and unhappiness are dependent on circumstances we can only pretend to control; joy comes from the deepest things in God's world.*

It is true that if we find poverty-stricken Christians from half way around the world, we should give ourselves to improve their circumstances, whoever we might think is responsible. This is part of our mission, and if we ignore it we have ignored what God has given us to share. But we should also learn from those who have joy in these desperate circumstances. We should let them guide us into the deepest things in God's world.

What does the Prophet say? 'I, the Lord, love justice... salvation...righteousness.'

God is for us, not against us. God loves us; God doesn't hate us. So stop running around trying to make yourselves happy, the prophets often said.

Listen to the prophet, to find the message of joy:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners.*

It is not our happy and unhappy circumstances that are at the root of things. It is the joy that comes from faith in the God that is for us, not against us, the God who will in the *right time* 'build up the ancient ruins' and give us a garland rather than ashes, 'the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.'

It is faith in the God who created us and redeemed us that will give us joy as God grants us the right gifts for the right time in the right way.

Circumstances come and go. Sometimes the good and the bad are due to our choices, sometimes they are far beyond our control. They require our attention. They should make us sometimes stop doing some things and start doing other. Circumstances should sometimes be signs to us that we ought to hold on.

But we should never confuse our happiness or unhappiness at circumstances with the joy that is meant for all God's creatures. We know that the joy of a relationship with those long departed from our life is so much deeper than the superficial happiness of a relationship with those who simply keep us busy.

But we should never imagine joy is relegated to the past; God is still waiting for us behind every gift, or every absence, behind every happiness or unhappiness—waiting to offer himself to us, waiting for us to give ourselves to him.

We should never confuse our happiness or unhappiness at the gifts in our hands with the giver who has given us our bodies, minds, and souls.

Because the source of joy is no less than God. And the message of joy comes from knowing the deepest things about the God who is for us, not against us.

In the Eucharist we come to know again the meaning of the word itself; thanks—thanks to God for giving himself in Jesus Christ, thanks to God for granting us his everlasting presence in the Holy Spirit. In Holy Communion, our communion, our relationships with God and each other are meant to be restored, and to set us off on a week of restored communion with those we meet. This is joy.

Thanks be to God for joy in the midst of Advent, for joy in the midst of whatever we are in the midst of.

Thanks be to God.