

Followers of the Way

Joy

Lynda Rose 28-04-24

John 14: 6-27; Philippians 4: 8-13

How are you feeling this morning? Happy, a bit worried, contented, angry ... scared? Feelings are ephemeral, aren't they? They change according to the situation we find ourselves in – they can even be influenced by the weather, and what makes us happy one minute, can leave us profoundly depressed the next! Perhaps tellingly, the Bible doesn't really say much about happiness, but it does say an awful lot about joy. And Jesus spoke about joy too, of course. For instance, in John 15:7 He said, 'These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.'

First off, we know two very important things from this. One, that Jesus had joy – even in those agonizing hours leading up to the crucifixion, when He knew He faced seeming 'abandonment' and physical agony – and, two, that that's what he wants us to have as well.

So what's the difference between happiness and joy? And exactly what *did* Jesus mean when He said He had 'joy'? Indeed, how could He even begin to talk about 'joy', knowing what was ahead of Him?

A dictionary definition of happiness is the feeling of being pleased or happy. Not terribly helpful really, and one thinks Jesus could well have been excused for not feeling very 'happy' at the Last Supper, knowing He was about to be arrested. But the dictionary definition for 'joy' is a little stronger. The Merriam-Webster dictionary, for instance, says joy is 'the emotion evoked by well-being, success, good fortune or by the prospect of possessing what one desires...'. Which is a little better, so far as it goes, but if we think that was what Paul was talking about in Galatians, when he said '... the fruit of the Spirit is love, **joy**, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control...', I think we're maybe missing the point. 'Joy', in the Bible, means a lot more than just feeling pleased or 'happy' with life. And I think we get a glimpse of that in the two readings we've had this morning.

Let's start by looking at Jesus Himself. For the Lord, joy was rooted in His relationship with, and obedience to, God; which gave Him spiritual insight and power, of course, but which also meant He lived 'in the bigger picture'. Jesus, the Son of God, came to free us from bondage and the oppression of sin, which meant that, as a man, He fully saw and realised the power of sin, and the results that flowed from it. But at the same time, as Son of God, He saw life from the vantage point of eternity, and that gave Him an unshakeable 'centredness'. A peace that passes all understanding – because He knew

that the manifest wasn't the whole story, and He never lost that consciousness of God that was the direct result of His relationship with the One He called 'Father'. And it's this perspective that He's trying to give to the disciples at their last meal together. His words are, if you like, the disciples' manual or instruction book, which, if followed, will give the disciples the same joy Jesus Himself had. It all starts, first, with *knowing* God, and then *trusting* Him.

So Jesus begins, '... let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.' This actually is the bedrock of joy, and encouragement at its most profound, and Jesus means every word *literally*. **Believe and trust in Me ... let nothing disturb you.** Now this doesn't mean that, when we come to know Christ, all our problems suddenly miraculously disappear. Indeed, the reality is that we might find the reverse happens and all sorts of problems pop up, from the mildly irritating to absolutely devastating, and some of those problems might be deeply traumatic, because there's nothing the devil likes more than to destroy our peace ... rushing around like a headless chicken separates us from God. So don't do that, Jesus says. Whatever happens, believe and trust in Me ... keep the faith.

And then He spells out for the disciples exactly what it is they need to believe. V.6, 'I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.' Again, Jesus means these words literally. Despite what a lot of people try and tell you today, this isn't open to interpretation. Jesus alone is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. And the promise to those who understand this and love Him, and are faithful – who keep His word – is that, '... my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them' (v.23).

Joy is the direct fruit of our relationship with God, and of our obedience ... which starts with belief and is nurtured by trust. Joy is God's gift, but it's also, of course, something that has to be worked at, because when we first come to know God, it can actually be pretty difficult to trust Him that way, and to obey. After all, we're used in this world to things going wrong, to people letting us down, and all too often, when push comes to shove, of having to fend for ourselves. But our relationship with God is different, and it's that that we have to come to understand. God knows us intimately and, amazingly, He still loves us, and wants us to be whole. Everything that happens to us in life – even what we think at the time are 'bad' things – once we come into relationship with Christ and accept His Lordship, everything is geared towards that 'wholeness'. So we can trust that whatever happens in life, God's on our side. He will fulfil His promises, and bring good out of harm, order out of chaos. God won't let us down.

And as we realise and become grounded in this truth, so we learn, and begin to be changed – to be conformed to the image of Christ. We learn to be spiritually at peace and tranquil, whatever life might throw at us. And make no mistake, sometimes the world will attack us for that very peace and our witness. Only remember what Jesus said in the early days of His ministry, Lk 6:23, 'Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, and revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven.'

We can expect persecution, but that's the promise – as we are faithful, not only will God come and make His home with us (i.e. He won't leave us), but our reward will be great in

heaven. This was the deep truth Paul had learned, when he said to the Philippians, 'I have learned to be content with whatever I have...'. This wasn't resignation in the face of rejection and adversity, an 'I'll get through this' approach, said through gritted teeth.

This was proclamation – a celebration – of God's faithfulness. But to come to that unshakeable place, where we see things from the perspective of heaven, we have to play our part, which means first off that we have to trust, and we have to be obedient to whatever the Lord says, knowing that His hand is over all.

Joy, like this, is truly the fruit of the Spirit. It's born in and from our relationship with God – and as soon as we enter that relationship, the Holy Spirit gets to work to teach, heal, and free us from all that binds, so that we might be conformed to Christ, and become fully what the Lord has made and intends us to be. In that walk of 'becoming' the Lord will use us, and sometimes, without a doubt, we'll go through stony, difficult places, as He uses us to search for and help others. But the joy that no one can take from us is rooted in trust, knowing that, whatever happens, the Lord is in control, that He wills our good, and that He will provide.

Joy is the peace of God that allows us to remain unmoved, whatever life throws at us, whether for good or ill! It's that still point at the centre of the turning world, where we shelter under Christ's protection. It's knowing and trusting Him, and it's rooted in obedience to His commands. It's the knowledge that Christ is with us, and that at the last He'll take us safely home.