



Words that transform: Joy

Matthew 22:1-10 & Philippians 4:4

We come to the last in a short series of addresses, exploring words which bring transformation for the Christian and inspiration to the Christian community in its witness and engagement in the wider world. This word is the shortest of all—joy.

Once again, I use a passage of Matthew by way of background and, in addition, a verse from the teaching of the Apostle Paul to give some substance to our examination of this word “Joy”.

Joy is a delight in life that is far deeper than either pain or pleasure. When we explore what the scriptures have to say on this theme, this is affirmed by the fact that it is not limited by, nor tied solely to, external circumstances. Joy is by nature a gift of God and, like all the gifts and graces he gives to us, it can be experienced even in the face of the most challenging circumstances.

In our parable, we are told the king wanted his banquet hall to be filled with guests. The main purpose was not to impress others, but to share the joy of this special occasion which we are told is “for his son”.

The parable follows the normal pattern of the Jewish customs of the day: there was to be a great feast, such as a wedding feast and invitations were prepared. They were sent out, but the exact time was not communicated initially. When everything was ready, the servants went out again with the precise details and we bear in mind the fact that the second invitation would be delivered very close to the event itself.

A very strong date holder should already be in the guests’ minds, so the refusal is even more insulting, and especially for a family wedding.

The parable speaks on a wide scale, for it reminds us of the invitation of God to share in his joy. The text will speak back into the theme demonstrated in the parable.

Philippians 4:4

“Rejoice in the Lord always, I will say it again: Rejoice!”

Paul’s letter to the Philippians has often been described as “A Letter of Joy” and one writer introduced a recent commentary on the letter by saying that the letter was “an epistle of joy tested and refined”.

It is a letter that expresses a profound relationship of friendship that existed between Paul and this particular early Christian church. It is written to report about Paul’s own situation of imprisonment and its implications; the purpose being to encourage the Philippians in their faith, to thank the church for their generosity and to perhaps warn them of potential threats that lie ahead.

The powerful message of joy is underscored by the fact that the letter may have been written from the generally appalling conditions that the writer was facing.

The fact that Paul mentions the theme of joy so often in this epistle—in fact on 14 occasions in just four short chapters – may indicate that it was a missing factor in the life of this Christian community. We may ask ourselves why.



- there could have been tensions in the church family
- there would undoubtedly be a concern for Paul's situation, as he was very special to them
- they were struggling to live holy lives in a hostile world.

Joy is a noteworthy feature of the emotional culture of both parts of the Old Testament and the earliest Christian movement. I think it is imperative that we understand the nature of emotion. Drawing from a number of sources, my own conclusion is that emotions are feelings which are shaped by history and culture in specific contexts. For the Christian and the community in which we share, joy arises out of the story of God as we have come to understand it through scripture.

It is important to establish its definition because it is tempting to assume that joy is something natural and spontaneous and a universal given. For both the Jewish community and for Christians, joy arises out of particular circumstances.

In the Old Testament, Hebrew words point to joy as gladness or what at one time we used to call 'mirth'. If ever you have observed Jews at prayer, you might have been struck by the fact that they move around rather vigorously – and that comes from the Hebrew term 'sameah', which means 'to shine' and 'gull' or 'gill', which means 'spring about'. Joy for the Jew is related to God's law and his saving acts.

In the New Testament, the words most commonly used are 'chara' which is simply 'joy' and 'chairō' which is the 'act of rejoicing'. God has made available to all people in his redemptive grace a joy that is to be received and continually experienced.

This final word in this short series is most interesting because it is one that is often talked about but little developed by Christian writers and thinkers.

The Old Testament certainly informs the way we understand joy and Mary Douglas, a distinguished scholar in the field of social anthropology, offers a convincing suggestion:

When the Jewish community rejoiced in the law, what they were rejoicing in was that God was giving sacred order to life itself. The source of our joy as Christians is that we have been given order and purpose because of what God has done in Jesus Christ, through his death upon the cross and through his risen life offered to the world. This being the case, we could say that there is enormous similarity between the purpose of the two.

Let us return to the parable of Jesus and hold in our minds these thoughts about joy—and allow ourselves to gain a greater insight into what joy may have to say to us today.

This parable in Matthew has similarities to the parable of the Great Supper in Luke (Luke 14:16-24). They are connected mainly by what might be called 'the refusal' of the invited guests to come in. The final section, which takes us beyond our scripture today, John Wesley addressed in a sermon called 'On the Wedding Garment', where he focused on two points:-

- without the righteousness of Christ, we could have no claim to glory
- without holiness, we could have no fitness for it.

Our concentration is upon the first parable and seeing both the invitation and acceptance in relation to joy.



Joy is best understood when shared

By its very nature, joy must be shared. To attempt to keep it to oneself tends to spoil, as well as lose the gift of joy.

We can only begin to imagine and comprehend the hurt of the king and his disappointment when his guests treated the invitation with disdain, bearing in mind that we have already established that the meal is almost ready to be served.

This led the king to act swiftly to ensure that he had a house full of guests to share his joy. The instruction is given to the servants to go out and invite everyone they could find.

The wedding feast will proceed regardless, even though many of the original chosen people have declined the invitation.

The well-rehearsed words of Jesus tell us that the guests now include people from 'the street corners' and that the wedding hall will be filled with both good and bad, irrespective of who they are.

Writing on the theme of joy in Christ, Henri Nouwen` helps us by saying: "Joy does not simply happen to us. We have to choose joy and keep choosing it every day. It is a choice based on the knowledge that we belong to God and have found in God our refuge and our safety and that nothing, not even death, can take God away from us. Joy is the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing—sickness, failure, emotional distress, depression, war, or even death—can take that love away."

This kind of joy becomes infectious when shared with others and this is even more penetrating because of the fact that we dare not keep it to ourselves.

It was Mark Twain who said: "Grief can take care of itself, but to get the full value of a joy you must have somebody to divide it with."

From a very different source, Mother Teresa concluded, "Joy is a prayer—joy is strength—joy is love—joy is a net of love by which you catch souls."

God has shared his own joy with us

Any understanding of joy for the Christian begins and continues in God himself.

God has shared his joy with us in Christ. The embodiment of this joy is in acceptance, forgiveness and new life. This is a wedding celebration that has no end.

In our Christian experience, joy is part of our living out the implications of faith. We identify with the fact that joy is associated in particular with the everyday experiences of life and this certainly coheres with what we find in our Bible.

- joy is connected with marriage
- joy is associated with childbirth
- joy is seen in the seasons, especially harvest-time
- joy is closely linked to wine, expressing celebration.



Austin Farrer was perhaps one of the greatest Anglican theologians and philosophers of the twentieth century. He wrote in relation to the theme of joy, by linking it to the work of the Holy Spirit: “The gift of the Holy Spirit closes the last gap between the life of God and ours ... When we allow the love of God to move in us, we can no longer distinguish ours and his; he becomes us, he lives in us. It is the first fruits of the Spirit, the beginning of our being made divine.”

Such love is demonstrated in joy and people can perceive the life of God when they encounter it in all its fullness.

In the first chapter of Paul’s letter to the Philippians, we have a marvellous introduction which expresses the cause of his joy in the way he prays:

- prayers because of vivid remembrance of his past experience of this community —v.3
- prayers because of a common partnership—v.5
- prayers because of a confident assurance—v.6
- prayers because of a sharing in God’s grace—v.7.

From the outset of the gospel account of Jesus Christ, we are told that the message of the angels was to remove fear and it would *be* “good news of great joy and would be for all people”. (Luke 2:10)

Once we encounter this joy, then we must share it

Joy cannot be self-contained. It is almost impossible to hide a feeling of joy; it is as if it will burst out uncontrollably sooner or later.

If we have experienced this joy which is offered in Jesus Christ, then we must share it with others.

The Psalms of the Old Testament are replete with expressions of joy, giving voice to what, as the gift of God, makes them a people.

“But let all who take refuge in you be glad;
let them ever sing for joy.
Spread your protection over them,
that those who love your name may rejoice in you.”
(Psalm 5:11)

“Many are the woes of the wicked,
but the Lord’s unfailing love
surrounds the person who trusts in him.
Rejoice in the Lord and be glad, you righteous;
sing, all you who are upright in heart!”
(Psalm 32:10-11)

There is a fascinating story of the great artist Turner. A painting of *Cologne* was exhibited in 1826 between two portraits by Sir Thomas Lawrence. The sky of Turner’s painting was magnificent and so exceedingly bright that it had a most injurious effect on the two portraits between which it was hung.

Lawrence felt mortified and he openly complained about the position of his two paintings. On the morning of the opening of the exhibition, at a private viewing, a friend of Turner’s who had seen his painting in all its splendour led a group of expectant critics up to the picture. He stood back from it in consternation. The golden sky had changed to a dull colour. He quietly said to the artist, “Turner, what have you been doing to your picture?”



“Oh,” muttered Turner, in a low voice, “poor Lawrence was so unhappy. It’s only lamp black. I’ll wash it off after the exhibition.”

The joy of Christ cannot be permanently rubbed out.

This great theme of joy has so much to say to us. In relation to the teaching of Jesus in this parable, we remind ourselves that in the final analysis, God’s invitation is an invitation of grace.

The word in the Philippian text has an unusual repetition, which Ian Coffey describes in this way: “It is as if he can hear someone say, ‘Rejoice? You must be joking!’ Paul repeats himself, ‘I will say it again.’” Perhaps like some in the Philippian church family, we need to have this underlined for ourselves.

Our conclusion as to the meaning of the parable is not complex. The Jews were first invited to enjoy the good things of the kingdom. If they were to reject the opportunity, then the Gentiles and all others would be brought in.

Those who are gathered in from what we used to describe as “the highways and byways” had no claim to be guests at the banquet. They could never, by any stretch of the imagination, have expected such an invitation, let alone have deserved it.

The invitation comes from One who is open-hearted, with arms wide open and offering generous hospitality. Michael Green’s conclusion: “It was grace which offered the invitation and grace which gathered men in.”

This invitation is extended to you!