

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

PSALM 126

Rev. Catherine Buchan

Sunday 6th March 2011

John 15:1-11

We are glad. We rejoiced. We were like those who dream: our mouth was filled with laughter and our tongues with shouts of joy. That's is the experience of those who walk the pilgrim way, who follow as God's children. Joy is our hallmark.

How hard it is to say that to people in Scotland! The popular image of the church is a place where gloomy, joy-denying, hard-faced, dark-clad people meet to be solemn, going out into the world to disapprove. That's supposed to be you. I hope you don't recognise yourself or those around you! I don't think that was ever an accurate picture of the church in Scotland or anywhere else. It has always been a caricature, but it is a very popular one. The Rev. I.M. Jolly has a lot to answer for: but even he was only funny and popular because he was playing on a stereotype that people thought they recognised. People who seek out the truth of the stereotype are always surprised to discover that it is a lie.

Pilgrim people are those who take their faith very seriously: seriously enough to study it and to live by it. But the deeper they move into faith the more they are filled with joy at what God has done. The more seriously we take our faith the more joyful it makes us!

The Psalm we read this morning is a very joyful Psalm. Things are too good to be true. They are a matter which can't just be kept as a quiet pleasure: laughter and shouting is involved. It is noticeable and everyone is talking about it. "The Lord has done great things for us; we are glad" sings the Psalmist. What great things? The Old Testament story tells of them, from creation, through the choice of Abraham, the leadership of Moses into the Promised Land, the triumphs of the Judges, the beginning of the monarchy. Great things that God has done. But there is more. When we read this song of joy we have again to remind ourselves that this is not the casual song of someone in a good mood. The Psalmist is not singing because the sun is shining and he has had a good breakfast. He is singing because things have been unbelievably bad. This is the song of a people who have seen the worst imaginable happen: the invasion of the Babylonians; women raped on the streets; men killed, people rounded up and taken away into exile, and no hope of ever being a nation again.

But, *but* God has restored the fortunes of Zion. It didn't seem possible that it would ever happen, but it has. All out of the blue, as it were, the way that in season the water suddenly floods down and irrigates the dry Negev desert, God has turned their fortunes. Here they are, back in Israel, undertaking pilgrimage to a restored temple to worship God. It is fantastic! It is something to dance and sing about. This is a Psalm which reminds us that dourness is not a sacred attribute: think about it.

Joy, gladness, is a quality that permeates Scripture. It is so much part of the warp and weft of the Bible that we almost forget to notice it after a while. We forget that Jesus said that he told us the things of God, told us to remain united with him, to bear fruit in God's work, not so that God would be pleased with us, but so that our joy would be full. People who are involved in living out their faith, pushing at their comfort zone, determinedly looking to the good of others rather than their own pleasure, are the people who are the most joyful. And the world notices. The nations, the neighbours, say "Why? What is going on? God has done great things."

I will always remember the summer when I was 19 which I spent in the kitchens of an Austrian castle, which had been rebuilt and was being run as a Christian youth centre. The teenagers who came week by week had a great time, but they were expected to help with the washing up. One day while I was washing one of the boys who was drying asked me what I was paid to work there. Maybe he was thinking that he might like a summer job in a year or two. I told him it was 27 schillings, which was then just a bit under

three pounds a week. His jaw dropped. Why, he then asked, in slow German so that I could understand, was I so happy? Why were all the staff so happy? He had seen the joy of serving that God gives.

Jesus came to teach us to follow him into the joy that he knew. I am sure that Jesus was a happy person, even though he knew how to be serious and even angry, and even though he was often deeply distressed by the people he met. If he were not a happy person, I don't think that the disciples and the crowds would have come to him. Joy is attractive: gloom, dourness is not.

For the Psalmist the memory of God's restoration of his people was a continuing source of joy, and a source of confidence that God would continue to flood his people with unexpected blessing. It was his touchstone to remind him that although times of difficulty and sorrow would come - personally and for the nation, yet God's gift is gladness. Though there would be times of sowing in tears, yet by harvest time, laughter would hold sway.

The return from exile was the Psalmist's touchstone in these matters. For us it is something even greater. We look to the cross and the resurrection. Just as the Psalm reminded those who had been born after the restoration of Israel that things were not always so good, so we who live on this side of the resurrection should remember that things were not always so easy. Before Jesus there was constant anxiety about your state with God. There was always the possibility that you would not live right, not atone properly so that God could accept you. When there was a death among your family and friends, it was a time of real uncertainty and distress. For many in our world, even in our parish this state of affairs tragically still holds.

But God sent Jesus. God sent him to live our life, to model his joy, to take our sins and to die our death upon the cross. And then he brought him back from death in power and glory, so that we can know that we are forgiven, that death and darkness, sin and evil will not hold sway. The resurrection is God unexpectedly flooding the desert land to bring a harvest. The resurrection is our reason to always be filled with joy.

But what if you are not? What if you came here this morning filled with worry, or feeling depressed, or in the middle of a personal grief? Does that mean that you are not a traveller on God's pilgrim way? Does that make you a bad Christian? Of course not. One of the things which these pilgrimage psalms tell us over and over again is that our faith does not depend on us, and that our faith is not the same thing as our feelings. Our faith rests on God. Joy is not a requirement of Christian discipleship: something you have to feel if you are to be a Christian. It is a consequence. We do not have to acquire joy in order to experience life in Christ; it is what comes to us when we are walking the way of faith and obedience. We come to God because none of us has the ability within ourselves to be more than momentarily joyful.

Many people, of course, do not come to God in their quest for joy. They turn to entertainment and distraction, but that will not fit the bill. That distracts, may even bring laughter and help us forget our personal pain for a while, but joy is something deeper. The Christian writer C.S. Lewis discovered that as he pursued an intellectual quest for the momentary flashes of joy he had known, it led him only to Christ. This surprised him very much, but it is what seekers down the centuries have discovered.

Joy, the joy which God gives us, is not dependant on our good luck in escaping hardship, and distress. Far from it. Distress comes to Christians at least as much as to other people. Joy is not dependant on our good health and avoiding pain. Christian joy is actual in the midst of pain, suffering, loneliness and misfortune of all kinds. Think of Paul and Silas, whom we read about recently, singing while in pain and in prison. Paul is forever exhorting people to rejoice. He even claims that we can rejoice in our sufferings, "...because we know that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts." (Romans 5:3-5) Almost immediately after saying this he points out "We also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received our reconciliation." (Romans 5:11) And so Paul swiftly comes back to the resurrection.

The psalm we have read and have sung this morning does not give us joy as a package or a formula, but what it does is affirm the solidity of God's joy; it introduces us to a way of discipleship which will, as Jesus promised have consequences in joy. It tells the story of God's acts - and we now know far more of God's acts, know God's most profound acts, which put laughter on the lips and shouts of joy on the tongue.

Today we gather round the Lord's table. That is a solemn thing to do. It reminds us that Christ had to suffer and die for us. But it is also an act of unspeakable joy, for it reminds us that it was through God's love for us

that Christ chose to suffer and die for us. So take the elements in repentance, in sorrow at your own sin, but also in gladness and joy, for God loves you, values you, has chosen to save you. He has turned your fortunes and flooded the wilderness of your life with love. This may be a day when you are sowing in tears, for one reason or another. But at the table of our Lord the promise comes clearly that through God's love you will reap in joy.

Amen.