

REJOICE IN THE LORD

Zephaniah 3:14–20; Philippians 4:4–7; Luke 3:17–18

Paul in the Epistle reading this morning is telling us to be joyful:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.

Then he tells us why:

The Lord is near.

Then he says:

Do not worry about anything.

That doesn't mean be blasé, as if there is nothing to worry about. Like in Monty Python's 'Life of Brian' when they were all hanging on crosses singing, 'Always look on the bright side of life!' 'Do not worry about anything' here means: Even in the face of difficulties, do not let worry consume you. As Jesus once said, 'can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?' (Matt. 6:27). Worrying is probably more likely to take a few hours, or years, off your life.

I do find that some Christian people tend to be full of cares and worries—those are the vibes they give out. And we can appear to be rather joyless. Even in church! Especially it would seem at times in church. We can be so jolly serious, and sometimes rather grim-faced. Once we're outside or having morning tea we can smile and joke a bit, but not so

easily in church it would seem. We are actually allowed to smile in church—did you know that?

'Rejoice in the Lord always'. Tricky subject to preach on—joy—because if we haven't got it, we won't communicate it. I could say, lugubriously, 'Today, I'm going to speak with you, about joy'. How convincing would that be, I wonder?

There is rejoicing that goes on in our community at this time. We are entering the season of what is called 'joy to the world'. Much of it has to do with community and family togetherness, the relief and leisure of holidays, and the satisfaction of coming to the end of another year, and that's fair enough. But much of it also can be rather shallow, put on, and jollied up, because underneath for many people at this time there is an emptiness, and a desolation and a sense of dissatisfaction that people experience, and the surface joy is put on to compensate for it or to try and cover it up. So what we shall see in Australia is a lot of people perhaps pretending that they are having a great time, or trying to be 'joyful', when often it will be false and empty or just really sad.

Surface joy is sometimes a massive cover-up. There are comedians who have a tremendous sense of humour—like Spike Milligan or Peter Sellars—who underneath are really depressed people. Maybe humour is their attempted escape from reality.

If we are going to have a joy that is real, there's going to need to be a substantial basis for it. It needs to be something that sits inside us, and that doesn't get ruffled by changes in our outward circumstances.

'Rejoice in the Lord always'. Do you know where Paul the apostle was when he wrote those words? He was in prison, probably facing execution and death, certainly near to the end of his life—you see that from the beginning of this letter of his to the Philippians. And yet he knew a joy that could not be taken from him.

He wasn't the only one. In the Acts of the Apostles, we are told of a time when the apostles were arrested, and put in prison, and they were flogged, and told not to speak in the name of Jesus, and they went out 'rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name' (Acts 5:41).

Jesus himself 'for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God' (Heb. 12:2).

Clearly this kind of inner joy that is not affected by outward circumstances must have a basis outside of ourselves.

What is joy, anyway? It can be an elusive thing, and not something you can make for yourself. Often it comes, simply as a gift. Once years ago when our kids were small we were here on Eyre Peninsula for a family holiday and went with friends to Arno Bay. There were some huge sand hills there, and we were sliding down the sand hills on bits of plywood. We were just having fun as families together, the wind was swishing the clouds across the blue sky, we could see out to the sparkling sea out in the gulf, and I stopped and thought, This is sheer joy. There were elements of trust, well-being, total relaxation, a great sense

of things being *right*. A wholesome sense of rightness and goodness and invigorating good pleasure. That's when it came to me: *Joy is a sense of the rightness of things.*

We may all have had our moments like that. But it is doubtful if any of us have ever known completely unalloyed joy in this sense. There is usually something there that troubles us, unsettles us, gives us sense of unease about ourselves – awareness of things not right.

But leaving that aside for the moment – what would be the joy that **God** knows in Himself? Nothing unright – total pure unalloyed pleasure in His own being – everything to be joyful about! Joy is not only in oneself but also in relationships. That is often how we know our greatest joy: a baby smiles, a loved one responds, we have pleasure in the company of another. God has that in full measure: in the communion of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit—the love-relationships that are *within* God—so full and free. And then the triune God has love-relationships with all the creatures God has made. So God's joy in relationships must be huge.

Particularly, believe it or not, God has great joy in *us*. In the Old Testament reading we heard a prophecy from the book of Zephaniah. After God has said how the people need to be humbled and to seek the Lord, he then says: 'The Lord your God is in your midst'—a bit like Paul saying 'The Lord is near' as a cause for rejoicing:

The Lord your God is in your midst,
a mighty one who will save;
he will rejoice over you with gladness;
he will quiet you by his love [or *he will rest in his love*];

he will exult over you with loud singing (Zeph. 3:17).

I somehow imagine that as God singing under the shower—about how much He loves us, and about how delighted He is with us, once He has done His saving work in us. That is amazing love. You want to know how there can be joy when things are not wholly right? Listen to the song God sings over us in the shower! That is how joy can spread whether there is rightness or not—even in apparently unpromising situations.

So we need to know that *joy is in God*. God is pure joy. That is why Paul says in another place the fruit of the Spirit is joy (Gal. 5:22). Psalm 16 says: 'In your presence is the fullness of joy, and at your right hand there is pleasure for evermore' (Psalm 16:11).

That is why it is so silly to try and manufacture our own joy from ourselves, when that great joy is already there in God. That can be the big mistake we have made—we are missing out on so much when we do that. So Paul says 'Rejoice *in the Lord*' at all times. Why? Because 'the Lord'—this Lord, who sings over us in His love—'is near'!

Jesus went to some pains to speak of these things with his disciples the night before He died. He had great joy in his Father God, and in what the Father had sent him to do for us, even though it meant him going to death on the cross. He knew the joy of his Father, and wanted us to be in on it too. He said, 'These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and your joy may be full' (John 15:11).

Joy. Yet what was about to happen to him? Terrible suffering and death. Is it possible to have joy even in these circumstances? Yes, but not because the joy of the Father somehow counteracts and outweighs the pain, but *in these very things* to know that the Father is immediately present and active in His fullness of joy. This—not just some later outcome or reversal—was ‘the joy that was set before him’ that caused Jesus to ‘endure the cross, despising the shame’ (Hebrews 12:2) That joy was fully with him as he approached the cross, for he spoke of it. So the disciples rejoiced in their being beaten and rebuked—not in some later hoped-for improvement or things turning out all right in the end, but *in the very sufferings themselves*: ‘rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonour for the name’ (Acts 5:40–42). What did they know in that moment? Nothing less than the presence of the Father, in whose presence is the fullness of joy.

Joy mentioned more times in Paul’s letter to Philippians than in any other letter. Yet that is the one he wrote in prison, faced with a possible death sentence.

So we can have remarkable gentleness in all situations Paul says, ‘Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near’ (Phil. 4:5). What do we fix our minds on? The petty considerations that surround us, or the great God of joy that we know in that? What about our fearful shortcomings and our desperate needs? They can be expectantly referred to God without anxiety. Is God going to put a foot wrong? Has He ever? Is it in Him to do that? Or is He pure unadulterated rightness and joy? Jesus was not afraid to make prayers and supplications to the Father ‘with loud cries and tears’, not because he was uncertain of the

Father's ability and rightness but because He was utterly convinced of it, and knew it to be worth more than anything else (Hebrews 5:7).

'He will rest in his love'—*for us*. From this great joy of God in us has come the deep peace of the forgiveness of sins wrought through Christ on the cross. Do you know the Gaelic blessing?

Deep peace of the running wave to you
Deep peace of the flowing air to you
Deep peace of the quiet earth to you
Deep peace of the shining stars to you
Deep peace of the gentle night to you
Moon and stars pour their healing light on you
Deep peace of Christ the light of the world to you
Deep peace of Christ to you

Deep peace with God through the taking away of sin—all that troubles our conscience and takes away our inner peace and joy. That taking away into himself everything that disturbs our joy is what Jesus achieved on the cross. And God raised him up. To know that this is what the Father is up to in all that happens—this is true joy *in the Lord*. By this we are brought into and kept in an eternal relationship of intimate joy with the Father.