

Sermon 30 June 2024 Joy

Philippians 4:4-7 John 15: 9-13

In our Gospel reading, Jesus, in exhorting his disciples to live a life of love, says this, *'I have told you this, that you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your joy will overflow.'* So, the message here is that when we receive love, we feel joy, and that is probably self-explanatory, but also, and here is the real point of this message, that it is in the giving of love that we also feel joy. Now that is not so self-explanatory.

One of the great things about the giving of love is that it is a two-way exercise – both the receiver and the giver benefit, they both feel good. You want to feel good about life, about yourself? Well, then go and give some love. And by love, we mean, of course, some TLC.

You might remember the story I told about a year 12 student at King's who had just returned from his first stint of community service. From memory, I think he had been visiting a retirement home. I happened to be there when he and the other students returned and disembarked from their taxi. With a big smile on his face, he said, 'Rev, that was one of the most uplifting things I have done this year.' And this was from a boy who up to this point had been too busy to get involved in community service because he was playing sport for his school, amongst other things.

Now, there is no question that the elderly person that student had visited would have received a big lift but it is interesting that the student himself received arguably just as big a lift. That, my friends, is how it works, and there is no question that Jesus understood this so very well.

The thing with joy is that it is actually about attitude. How we respond to any situation is up to us. We can look for the downside or we can look for the upside, and how we respond will determine how we feel. I will come back to that in a minute.

I want to focus for a moment on the words of Jesus: *'No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.'* This can be taken in a literal sense and there is no doubt that Jesus had his own death in mind when he said this. These words have also been used countless times at Anzac services and on similar occasions when the supreme sacrifice made by so many in the theatre of war has been acknowledged. However, I don't really believe Jesus is saying to you and me, 'Look, if you really want to show your love for someone, you need to go and actually die for them.' If we all did that, God's kingdom here on earth wouldn't exactly be growing, it would be doing the opposite!

I think we need to take this metaphorically. To give your life to a cause means to do everything within your power to support that cause. This is how we should interpret these words. We need to do everything we possibly can to help others, to spread that love around, and yes, it will inevitably involve a degree of sacrifice. I will leave it at that for now.

In our reading from Philippians, Paul tells us 'to always be full of the joy of the Lord,' and he emphasises this by repeating it, 'I say it again – rejoice!' This is a command, not an option. I find it interesting that he feels the need to really emphasise the point by repeating it. I find it interesting because too many Christians do focus on the negative – don't do this, don't do it this way. Worship becomes a very serious business – no place for the expression of joy.

You might remember the story I told about Dr Tony Campolo, American pastor, author and lecturer, who was speaking at a Christian festival in Pennsylvania. He drew thousands of young people and it had a definite Pentecostal flavour to it. The festival reached a crescendo on the Saturday night and word got around that he would be preaching at a nearby Lutheran church the next morning.

Hundreds of charged-up young people from the festival came to the Sunday service. Instead of the usual three hundred people, there were almost a thousand people packed into the auditorium and the balcony. This was a very 'high' church, bells and smells and a lot of ritual.

The presiding minister took his place behind the pulpit and intoned in a sombre voice, 'This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it. Let us enter his gates with thanksgiving and into his courts with praise.' At that point, one of the young people in the balcony called out, 'All right!' The rest of the young people started to clap and cheer. Tony Campolo said the reaction of the presiding minister was quite something to watch. The poor man just didn't know how to handle it. His knees actually buckled. The last thing in the world he expected when he called upon the congregation to make a 'joyful noise unto the Lord' was that anyone actually would!

I think we have to be careful we don't allow ritual and formality to get in the way of joyful worship. It is important we strike the right balance, and above all, 'to be always full of the joy of the Lord,' as Paul puts it.

I want to finish by saying this. The way we really influence people, make any sort of impact on others, is by what we do and are, not necessarily by what we say. If we are to be any sort of advertisement for our faith, it is by our actions not our words that will determine the nature and the message of that advertisement. Spreading goodwill is as good a way of promoting our faith as anything else. How do we do that?

We spread goodwill through what we do for others, through being kind and caring. We can even spread goodwill through smiling. Nothing lifts spirits quite like a happy smile. The Bible even tells us that: *'Smiling faces make us feel happy.'* Proverbs 15:30. Show happiness and if you do it enough, people will want some of what you have got. Ralph Waldo Emerson said, *'When a happy person comes into the room, it is as if another candle has been lit.'*

Unfortunately, we all know people who, no matter what the situation, will always look for the downside, the negative. So let me conclude with a story that is not theological in itself but has a message about life, and in the end, theology should always be about life.

The story is about a farmer who had a neighbour, a constant complainer and someone who simply could not see the positive side of anything. The farmer decided to impress the man for once in his existence, so he bought this fantastic hunting dog. He trained it thoroughly and invited his neighbour to accompany him duck hunting. He showed the neighbour how the dog could stand motionless for an hour and pick up a scent a kilometre away. Not impressed. The farmer shot a duck which landed in the middle of the pond. Upon command, the dog trotted out, walked on the surface of the water (that's actually the religious bit), retrieved the bird and dropped it at his master's feet.

'What do you think of that?' the farmer asked the neighbour. The neighbour looked at him and said, 'Your dog can't swim, can he?'

There's just no pleasing some people. So, to sum up. Joy is an attitude. Joy is infectious. Faith should lead to a positive attitude to life. Love is a positive sentiment and a positive force. There is absolutely nothing negative about love, and love lies at the heart of what it means to be a Christian.