

The God Who Speaks

7: A Gospel of Joy

Opening Prayer and Welcome

God our loving Father,
You made us your children in baptism.
Pour out on us the gifts of your Holy Spirit.
Help us as a parish to know the paths we must follow
so as to build up your kingdom.
Teach us to grow in faith,
to encourage one another with words of hope,
and to care for your family with love.
Let us bear witness to the Good News,
and be faithful followers of your Son,
our Lord Jesus Christ
who lives and reigns with you
and the Holy Spirit
for ever and ever.
Amen

Introduction to the Theme

Many people were surprised when the cardinal archbishop of Buenos Aires took the name of Francis on becoming Pope - there had never been a Pope Francis before! Surely a better name would be 'Pius' (meaning 'devoutly religious') or 'Benedict' (meaning 'blessed'), or even to take the name John Paul to show that he was staying true to the path set by some of the great Popes of recent years?

But Francis is a wonderful name for him, and he wanted to teach us something by it.

Saint Francis was always a bit of an outsider; when the Church was powerful and wealthy in medieval Europe, Francis gave away everything he had. He loved the poor, the sick and the vulnerable, and that was the way he lived his life. People thought he was mad. It was said that he could cry tears of joy at being given a piece of dry bread - few of us could be so grateful and openhearted as to do so much over something so little.

So Francis, our Pope, wants to teach us by his name.

Everyone has noticed that Pope Francis often has a smile on his face. His smile, although happy and playful, is also something that he wants to teach us. It's a message that we can see in the names he gives to his letters to the Church: *Laudato Si'*, Praise be to you, my Lord; *Evangelii Gaudium*, The Joy of the Gospel; *Amoris Laetitia*, The Joy of Love; *Gaudete et Exsultate*, Rejoice and Be Glad!

His message to the Church is this: Christian life is a life of **joy**.

Scripture Reading

Philippians 4:4-14 (JB)

I want you to be happy, always happy in the Lord; I repeat, what I want is your happiness. Let your tolerance be evident to everyone: the Lord is very near. There is no need to worry; but if there is anything you need, pray for it, asking God for it with prayer and thanksgiving, and that peace of God, which is so much greater than we can understand, will guard your hearts and your thoughts, in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers and sisters, fill your minds with everything that is true, everything that is noble, everything that is good and pure, everything that we love and honour, and everything that can be thought virtuous or worthy of praise. Keep doing all the things that you learnt from me and have been taught by me and have heard or seen that I do. Then the God of peace will be with you.

It is a great joy to me, in the Lord, that at last you have shown some concern for me again; though of course you were concerned before, and only lacked an opportunity. I am not talking about shortage of money: I have learnt to manage on whatever I have, I know how to be poor and I know how to be rich too. I have been through my initiation and now I am ready for anything anywhere: full stomach or empty stomach, poverty or plenty. There is nothing I cannot master with the help of the One who gives me strength. All the same, it was good of you to share with me in my hardships.

Galatians 5:22,25 (JB)

What the Spirit brings is very different: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control... Since the Spirit is our life, let us be directed by the Spirit.

Discussion

When we think of joy, we don't immediately think of Saint Paul - great though he was, wasn't he a bit serious and wasn't he always telling people off?!

We can miss this message in Paul's letters: the message to be full of joy. It is a gift of God's Spirit in us, he says: it is the mark of a Christian. People thought the early Christians were mad: they were happy even when they had nothing; they faced persecution and martyrdom with joy. Normal people are happy when things are good and sad when they are bad, but that is not the Christian way.

*You may find it helpful to sit with these texts in silence for a little while. Then, in a spirit of helping one another, you could share your thoughts and discuss with one another what you notice in these texts from the Bible. **Listen to one another** because God also speaks through our sisters and brothers in Christ, and through us.*

You can use the following to help you, or explore other thoughts that come to mind:

How - by what method - does Saint Paul teach the first Christians?

What, do you think, does 'being a Christian' mean for Saint Paul?

What gifts of the Spirit do you notice in your own community?

A quiet reflection

Close your eyes and remain in quiet for a little while. Ask yourself if you can feel God's Presence right now. Or perhaps you can think back to something that happened today, or yesterday, that - on reflection - says to you that God is near, perhaps that God has spoken to you. Or it could be in a memory that comes to mind, where you can say, perhaps, that God was close?

The word that naturally comes together with the word 'joy' - at least in the Christian way of speaking - is *deep*.

That is something for us to reflect upon and to seek out in ourselves.

It isn't a matter of succeeding or failing to feel joy: joy is not something to try to achieve. Nor is joy 'the icing on the cake': proof that all is well with the world and with us. And nor is joy something superficial, just on the surface, like a fake smile: real joy is deep and it is from God.

As Saint Paul tells us from his own experience, joy isn't something that depends on things being right for us, or good. It isn't a reaction or a response to our circumstances or to what is going on. It is more than just a feeling, but it's a good start if we can at least feel the feeling.

What are you feeling right now? It's ok to be honest with yourself: this is a personal question just for you. It's ok not to feel joy or not to be able to find the feeling of joy inside yourself. For some people it is particularly difficult.

We speak of joy as a gift of God's Spirit because it isn't something that we make. Joy is, in fact, part of our deepest nature: it is how we are made - we are made to be joyful.

Of course we all recognise we don't always feel like that, but the lack of joy is not a failure - it is just a sign that we feel 'out of touch'. Saint Paul directs us rightly to turn towards God because joy is God's own nature, and when we feel in touch with God-in-us (what the Book of Genesis described as our being in God's *image and likeness* (Genesis 1:26) and which we understand as the Holy Spirit) then we experience our deep joy.

Scripture Reading

Psalm 95 (Grail)

Come, ring out our joy to the Lord;
hail the God who saves us.
Let us come before him, giving thanks,
with songs let us hail the Lord.

A mighty God is the Lord,
a great king above all gods.
In his hand are the depths of the earth;
the heights of the mountains are his.
To him belongs the sea, for he made it,
and the dry land shaped by his hands.

Come in; let us bow and bend low;
let us kneel before the God who made us
for he is our God and we
the people who belong to his pasture,
the flock that is led by his hand.

O that today you would listen to his voice!
‘Harden not your hearts as at Meribah,
as on that day at Massah in the desert
when your fathers put me to the test;
when they tried me, though they saw my work.

For forty years I was wearied of these people
and I said: “Their hearts are astray,
these people do not know my ways.”
Then I took an oath in my anger:
“Never shall they enter my rest.”

Discussion

You might recognise this psalm, as it is said every morning at the start of the Divine Office, the prayer of the Church, recited by religious brothers and sisters, priests, and many other people every day. It's a lovely text - as many of the psalms are - reminding the people of Israel to be joyful, to trust in God and to remain faithful. Tradition says that the psalms were written by King David himself; although this is unlikely and they have, perhaps, a number of different authors, they deeply reflect the faith of the Jewish people within which Christianity was born.

You may find it helpful to sit with the text in silence for a little while, or to recite it out loud: the psalms are hymns meant to be sung! Then, in a spirit of helping one another, you could share your thoughts and discuss with one another what you notice in this text from the Bible. Listen to one another because God also speaks through our sisters and brothers in Christ, and through us.

You can use the following to help you, or explore other thoughts that come to mind:

*What does this psalm say to you, in your heart?
What does it tell you about God and God’s loving care?
What does this psalm tell you about Israel’s understanding of joy?*

The Church Teaches

“Hard times may come, when the cross casts its shadow, yet nothing can destroy the supernatural joy that ‘adapts and changes, but always endures, even as a flicker of light born of our personal certainty that, when everything is said and done, we are infinitely loved’ [Evangelii Gaudium, 6]. That joy brings deep security, serene hope and a spiritual fulfilment that the world cannot understand or appreciate.

Christian joy is usually accompanied by a sense of humour... Ill humour is no sign of holiness... We receive so much from the Lord ‘for our enjoyment’ (1 Timothy 6:17), that sadness can be a sign of ingratitude. We can get so caught up in ourselves that we are unable to recognise God’s gifts.

With the love of a father, God tells us: ‘.. treat yourself well... Do not deprive yourself of a happy day’ (Sirach 14:11,14)... Saint Francis of Assisi lived by this; he could be overwhelmed with gratitude before a piece of hard bread, or joyfully praise God simply for the breeze that caressed his face.

This is not the joy held out by today’s individualistic and consumerist culture. Consumerism only bloats the heart. It can offer occasional and passing pleasures, but not joy. Here I am speaking of a joy lived in communion, which shares and is shared, since ‘there is more happiness in giving than in receiving’ (Acts 20:35) and ‘God loves a cheerful giver’ (2 Corinthians 9:7). Fraternal love increases our capacity for rejoicing in the good of others:

‘Rejoice with those who rejoice’ (Romans 12:15)... On the other hand, when we ‘focus primarily on our own needs, we condemn ourselves to a joyless existence’ (*Amoris Laetitia*, 110)”.
(Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, 125-128, 19 March 2018)

*Read these extracts again and sit with them for a short while in silence.
Then feel free to share with one another the thoughts that come to your heart.*

Closing Prayer

We thank you, Gracious Father, for this time of reflection.
We ask you to give us a fresh understanding of your Presence in our lives.
Strengthen us, we pray, in our faith
Help us to be present to each moment
So that we may see You and hear Your Voice
Everywhere and in all things and all people.
Give us hearts and minds that seek the face of Jesus,
And help us, through the power of the Holy Spirit,
To be always grateful for your blessings,
For the gracious gift of Your Presence.
We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ
In the unity of your Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Reading suggestions

Pope Francis, *The Joy of Discipleship*, Loyola Press, 2016. A selection from sermons and talks given by the Holy Father. As with many of his writings, it is both very readable and encouraging.

Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* (The Joy of Love), Apostolic Exhortation on Love in the Family, 19 March 2016. This letter was written following the Synod on the Family (4-25 October 2015) which had the theme: ‘the vocation and mission of the family in the Church and in the contemporary world’.