

Solid Joys And Lasting Pleasures
Advent 3, Year C
Philippians 4: 4-7
13 December 2009

In the film “Beckett” Thomas A Beckett has fought his way up from obscure Saxon origins to considerable wealth and power by making himself extremely useful to the Norman overlords. He has been so successful at intuiting the needs of his master King Henry that he has been made Chancellor of England. So impressed is Henry with his hard working, opportunistically clever, and ruthless servant that he decides to make him Archbishop of Canterbury, as a way of subduing the Church to the Crown.

But at just this point a sea change overcomes Beckett. He decides to serve God and his Church with the same total devotion he once gave to the King. So just before his consecration he sells all his possessions, and uses his cashed up assets to clothe the poor of Canterbury. As he walks away from this mass outfitting scene he says in an aside to God, “Lord, I didn’t realise just how much fun it would be – it feels like going on holiday.”

St Paul has received a very bad press from some commentators over the years. According to them he is the man who ruined Christianity. He took the Master’s original message of love and turned it into a set of fear filled restrictions. Anti women, anti sex, anti pleasure, obsessed with sin and guilt – this man apparently has a lot to answer for. As British comedian Peter Cook memorably summed up Paul’s typical message, “Dear Corinthians, stop enjoying yourself, don sackcloth and ashes, and start looking miserable.”

To which I would want to reply, “Have you never read the fourth chapter of the epistle to the Philippians? It is written by a man who obviously knew what happiness really is. What is more the big J word comes up there – Joy. And there are quite a few passages like that to be found in the Pauline epistles.”

Ah, but Paul’s critics might reply, even the most sourpuss among us have the odd moment of happiness, when the pressure is off, and the good things of life are there to be enjoyed in moments of tranquillity. But the inconvenient truth about that theory is that these aren’t at all the circumstances under which the Christians at Philippi are living. They are being given a hard time by their unbelieving neighbours, with lots of humiliations and petty spiteful acts being carried out against them. And consider Paul’s life trajectory as an apostle. Court appearances, time in jail, the odd lynching or two, a shipwreck, and in the end execution in Rome – this doesn’t sound like a barrel of fun.

Which rather raises the question as to what the good life consists of. Here in the post Christian west the general assumption is that it is

about avoiding pain and maximising pleasure, it is about exalting the ego – the coded phrase for this is developing your full potential - and surrounding yourself with good stuff. But supposing our contemporaries want to go deeper, and to try for more, which lets face it, the word joy forces you to do. The more literary among them might recall that famous line from the William Blake poem:

He who binds to himself a joy does the winged life destroy,
He who kisses a joy as it flies lives in eternity's sunrise.

But apart from reminding us that joy can't be had for the asking – that it has a will of the wisp quality – that it comes and goes as it pleases – this doesn't get us very far. Because obviously Paul is talking about something different – something, dare I say it, rather more substantial?

But there is a useful clue here to get us on the right track. Joy comes from outside us; it is not something that we can produce. It is as though we have been visited for a brief time by a spirit, a good spirit who wishes us well, and who gives us those exalted feelings we might only experience a few times in a life time, of euphoria and ecstasy.

Here we are this morning doing pretty much what those Christians at Philippi would have been about on a Sunday morning. We have assembled together to do what they did – to call down the Holy Spirit on ourselves and on the bread and the wine so as to identify ourselves completely, and those gifts, with the victory of Christ, as we joyfully anticipate his return.

When I say call down the Holy Spirit it is not as though he is not there one minute, and then zap, pow – by using the right formula of words he suddenly leaps down from heaven and is here with us in all his astonishing presence. Rather it is that the Holy Spirit is with us all the time in what we do as a parish. He was here on Wednesday morning when parishioners came together to provide Wednesday café for rest home residents in the locality. He will be here with us on Tuesday evening when the Vestry meets to make wise decisions about the Church building. He was present in a variety of pastoral encounters that took place in caring for the sick and the house bound. The Church is continually sustained in its life by the ever-present presence of the Holy Spirit. We could not exist as the Jesus community without the continuous miracle of the descent of the Holy Spirit as it takes place in a continuing Pentecost.

So when as the assembled Christian community in this place we call down the Holy Spirit on the gifts of bread and wine we are making dramatically visible in an acknowledged symbolic presence what is always true in our life together as a Christian community. We give explicit focus during the Great Thanksgiving prayer to what is always

going on among us. In fact the opening dialogue line in the Great Thanksgiving Prayer couldn't spell it out in a more explicit form, "The Lord is here, God's Spirit is with us."

It is the Holy Spirit's presence in our lives as believers that is the source of our joy. There is a spontaneous quality about the Spirit's presence – we can't capture it or control it – William Blake got that right. The Spirit is calling the shots around here. And it is the Spirit of Jesus – it is not off pursuing its own wacky independent agendas. That is why its primary business here this morning is making available to us the results of the victory he achieved on the cross and out of the empty tomb.

But just as important is the forward looking focus of the Spirit's drawing power among us. For each of the triune persons has a particular role in the work of our salvation. Our loving heavenly Father initiates and begins the work of our salvation, his beloved Son Jesus develops and continues it, and the Holy Spirit completes and perfects it. The Spirit of Jesus is the Spirit of God's perfected future. His presence among us is the promise that God's new world will arrive in its fullness as surely as the day follows the night. The good gifts he shares among us are a first taste of what that new world will be like. That in part is the point of the joy we experience from time to time.

But more particularly that joy is rooted in the assurance that God will prevail in all the ups and downs of the human story. He will have the last word in history. No matter how rough the going gets in our personal world we know how the story ends. Which is why Paul thought he had a handle on what was what in all the thrills and spills of his life. This was the life that really was life even when grumpy people were out to get him. And it is why he could recommend magnanimous behaviour to the Philippians. It is an appropriate way to behave if you believe that the Lord is near, close at hand, his presence subtly changing and shaping people and events all the time.

"Come, Lord Jesus, come," is one of the earliest Christian prayers. His return soon was anticipated most at the Eucharist. Here we call out to him with longing - because his Spirit will complete our lives. Which gives us every reason to rejoice.