

Sharing our Faith – The Joy of the Gospel

Today we begin a short three-sermon series on sharing our faith. The first of these is entitled 'The Joy of the Gospel', as it is precisely *this* that we are called to share – both the gospel, and its joy. But how do we allow ourselves to be excited – or re-excited – by the joy that we ourselves encounter in the good news of Jesus, and the joy we can feel when we begin to share that good news with others. Because, if we're honest, for most of us the notion of 'sharing our faith' is one that fills most of us with dread.

But, a great place to start is Paul's letter to the Philippians, as it's a letter with joy at its heart. But allow me to take a few moments to explain the context in which Paul is writing.

Paul is in prison, most probably in Rome. It's a long period of imprisonment and likely to be his last. He's already served Christ for at least 25 years, and his first visit to Philippi had been just over 10 years before this letter. He's in prison awaiting trial and, although he could receive guests – we know that both Timothy and Epaphroditus have been with him, and he could write – he's *still* chained and with a constant Roman guard.

He's writing to the church in Philippi because Epaphroditus is about to return and Paul wants to express appreciation for Epaphroditus' work and to thank the church for their gifts and support during his imprisonment. Given their concern for him, he uses the opportunity to tell them of his own joy and confidence in the Lord, even in the midst of his imprisonment and impending trial. He also expresses his affection for the church and mentions his desire to send Timothy to them. He also uses the opportunity to instruct the Philippians through his writing and his own example. He seems to be concerned about the possible divisions that are occurring in the church, and he writes to encourage church unity. So, in a short letter of four chapters, he manages to cover quite a lot!

What comes across in this letter is Paul's huge sense of joy. The noun '*joy*' or the verb '*rejoice*' appears 14 times in total, and 5 times in just the first chapter. You might think this unexpected for a man in prison, but Paul was not just *any* man. For a *travelling apostle* to be put in prison must have seemed like a concert pianist having his hands tied behind his back. How can he possibly continue the work he's been called to do? It seems as if it's all gone very wrong. So why is he so full of joy?

Well, he's joyful for several reasons. Firstly, he's full of joy for the church in Philippi and their partnership or fellowship with him in reaching others with the gospel. There's a clear sense of them working together, even if not physically together. And their joy is clearly in sharing their faith with others.

Secondly, he's full of joy that through his suffering, the good news of Jesus Christ has actually spread. So whilst the church in Philippi are extremely anxious about him, he writes in chapter one that what has happened to him has actually helped to advance the gospel! You can imagine him joyfully sharing the gospel with every Roman guard assigned to be chained to him – and the word has spread throughout the whole palace guard, and also outside because his imprisonment has given confidence to other Christians to speak the word.

And thirdly, he is full of joy about the future, whether he is freed from jail or not. In some respects, things couldn't be better! But let's not forget that Paul is a man chained up 24/7, for many months (years even) and there's a chance that, if found guilty, he could face the death penalty.

Now, if I try and put myself in Paul's position, the words 'joy' and 'rejoice' are not words I think would immediately spring to mind. But the Bible is full of verses telling us to respond to suffering with joy. For example, in James 1:2 – *'When troubles come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy'*.

Are you joking, I think! When trouble comes my way, my first thoughts are not usually about experiencing great joy, and I doubt yours are too. My typical reaction is more along the lines of fear, panic, worry and even hopelessness. At the very least, I reserve the right to 'get a monk on' and complain about my troubles. Not an opportunity for great joy. So why don't *my* experiences of struggle match up with what I find in the Bible? When I think of some of the Bible greats such as Moses, David, Elijah, Mary, and then Jesus himself and the disciples. Why the gigantic gap between them and us?

I read a book a while ago that helped me find the answer to this. The book is *'Choose Joy Because Happiness isn't Enough'* by Kay Warren. Kay, with her husband Rick, is the founder of a church in California and she spoke at a leadership conference I went to a couple of years ago. You may know the name Rick Warren, the author of the bestselling book *'The Purpose Driven Life'*. Kay has experienced some considerable difficulties in her life. She talks of huge stresses in her relationship with Rick early on in their marriage which nearly

tore them apart; she's had breast cancer; and in 2013 their 26 year old son ended his life following years of crippling depression.

Here's what Kay Warren says about joy: *'Joy is a choice. The level of joy you experience is completely and totally up to you. It is not dependent on anyone else – what they do or what they say. It is not dependent on the amount of sadness or suffering or difficulties you endure. At the end of each day, the amount of joy you experienced is the exact amount of joy you chose to experience. You, my friend, are in charge.'*

Now, this might well put you off ever opening her book, as it all sounds a bit sugary sweet. You might well be thinking 'How can someone who has suffered such tragic loss speak of joy? Is she for real?' It helps if we understand her definition of joy. Based on her reading of Paul's letter to the Philippians, Kay describes joy as: *'The settled assurance that God is in control of all the details of my life, the quiet confidence that ultimately everything is going to be all right (key word here is ultimately), and the determined choice to praise God in all things.'* (Repeat).

If you follow this definition, you then begin to see how Paul experiences joy. He has every expectation that what has happened to him will turn out to be for good – that God is in control. He has expectations and hope for the future. He has confidence that he will live and his ministry will continue. And when thinking of the church he began in Philippi all those years ago, despite the ups and the downs and his own uncertain situation, he says that he *'always prays with joy.'*

In all of our lives, there's no doubt that we experience both joy and sorrow. You can imagine this as being like a set of parallel train tracks, with joy and sorrow running inseparably throughout our days. Every day, good things happen – the beauty of a rainbow, a day spent with good friends, the smile of a child, an unexpected gift. That's the track of joy. But every day may also hold disappointment, challenges, struggles – poor health, a call that's never made, the loss through death of a close friend or family member. That's the track of sorrow. You can't focus on the one, and ignore the other. Life isn't perfect. Positive thinking doesn't rub out the negative things, just as there will always be something, when you're feeling low, that will force you to smile. If you look at train tracks in the distance, at some point they merge, and you see only one.

If you believe that Jesus defeated death on the cross, so that when we die we also rise to eternal life, then *this* is the point at which we meet Jesus face to face, when the tracks of sorrow and joy merge but only the joy remains. This is the '*ultimately*' in the statement that everything is going to be alright. But until then, we live with the parallel tracks.

But let's not confuse joy with happiness. They are not synonymous with each other. Having happy feelings doesn't mean that you are joyful; neither does a lack of happy feelings mean that you don't have joy. It doesn't mean not being upset when someone you love dies, or you lose your job, or a relationship ends. But it's the *difference* that being a Christian makes to the way we respond to problems. Many of you here this morning can testify to this. How, even through the most difficult of times, you learn something new about God's love and care for you, usually through the actions of others around you.

And, you know, it's in the *sharing* of that experience that enables you to communicate your faith to others. Because sharing our faith is rarely standing on a soapbox in the middle of Cambridge, or an academic argument with a friend as to why they should believe in God, but it's the lived out faith in our *own* lives that makes people sit up, take notice and ask why. A student once wrote: *'I became a Christian at University not because I thought it was cool or because the pastor was wearing ripped jeans. I became and remained a Christian because I met a group of people who really loved and needed God so much they made me wonder whether I needed God. The way they lived and loved was radically different from anything I had experienced before. It was contagious.'* It's how we demonstrate the truth of the gospel message. The joyful truth that God loves us and will never stop. A message of joy that runs all the way through the Bible, from the prophets to the Gospels, to Mary expressed in the Magnificat (as we heard) and to Paul.

But joy is not true joy if we keep it to ourselves. The joy of the good news of Jesus Christ demands to be shared. Through what we say, and through what we do – how we live out our faith in the context in which we find ourselves. If it is not shared, the joy weakens and withers away, and we resemble people of Lent, rather than people of Easter. Sharing the good news of what God has done for us in Jesus will renew our faith and enable us to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that we may be filled to the measure of all the fullness

of God. Words of Paul to a different group of first century Christians, but as true for us today as first expressed many years ago.

Let's pray.

Father, help us to choose joy in our lives. Rekindle hope in our hearts. Help us to keep seeking the joy that belongs to each one of us in Jesus Christ. And help us to confidently share the joy of the gospel in how we both live and love. In Jesus' name, Amen.