

## **Walking the Way of Jesus with Paul**

In these three Bible studies I hope to dwell on three key virtues or gifts, virtues that we might seek to nurture and encourage in ourselves and one another. They are key characteristics of the Christian life; **joy, humility and perseverance**, all things at the heart of the Christian vocation, all things that we need to ask God to nourish within us, especially when life is hard and challenging. I think that virtues are not only things that we are born with (or not), and not only things that we can just keep hoping we will acquire, but things that the Holy Spirit can grow in us and which we can pray for and practice. I'm more and more aware that I am a practising Christian; that my faith is something I have to keep going at, that faith is something I *do* as well as something I *believe*. I hope that these three studies will have a practical impact for you, as preparing them has done for me.

It's good to return to such a foundational text as Paul's letter to the Philippians, to remind ourselves that these words have sustained and nourished not only the community to whom Paul first wrote but countless generations of Christians since. It's overwhelming to imagine that a letter penned in captivity and addressed to a very particular, and probably quite small group, in a corner of the Roman Empire, could yet become Holy Scripture, carrying hope and bearing the word of God to the great community of the faithful. And here, now, today, and for the next few days, it might become something holy for us.

Let's remind ourselves a little about the background to this astonishing letter. Philippi was in what is today modern Greece, and it was annexed to the Roman Empire in about 168BC. It was a largely Gentile and rather wealthy, cosmopolitan town, with gold mines nearby. There is very little there now but ruins, but in Paul's day it was what the newspapers might have called 'a leading Roman colony'. Paul went there on his first visit to Europe. He met Lydia there and she became a convert. He healed a slave girl there, a girl who was being used to make money by her 'owners' (a trafficked girl we might say). The owners were furious at this interfering do-gooder and got him flogged and locked up. After an earthquake at the jail, Paul, and his companion Silas, could have made a run for it, but they didn't. This impressed the jailer so much (since he would have lost his job and his life if they had gone missing) that he became a follower of Jesus too. When Paul and Silas were released they made it to Lydia's house, the one with the purple curtains. That story you can 'read all about' in Acts 16.

The letter to the Philippians was written after those events to people Paul clearly knew or remembered well, from a time when he was once again confined, perhaps under house arrest. We don't know where, but we have the sense that this time he is unlikely to get out and that the time for miraculous earthquakes is now over. Paul is facing his own death. We get a sense in this letter of Paul's affection for the church in Philippi and this letter is much less controversial in tone than some of his others. There is no 'you stupid Philippians!' section. And we don't have a sense of Paul making an argument and using quotations to defend it. There is little quoting from the Hebrew Scriptures. He's writing in that more direct way that you do when you know you have little time and you just have to get on and 'say it'. Reading this letter is also a bit like that experience you have when you are reading

Shakespeare. It's full of famous phrases, bits we know well but don't necessarily know the context, the kind of verses that have become part of our 'mother tongue' as Christians, the things we quote often, or verses we set to music.

- Rejoice in the Lord always..
- The peace of God which passes understanding..
- Whatever is true, whatever is honourable
- Let the same mind be in you that was in Jesus Christ..

It's also, famously, Paul's most joyful letter. On the handout, you have written out most of the times that joy or rejoicing are referred to. If you were a copy editor, trying to lick this letter into shape ready for publication, you might have said that perhaps he has over-egged the whole joy thing, but Paul is determined to keep on reminding us of joy and rejoicing. But when you paint 'Rejoice in the Lord always' over the chancel arch or the pulpit, or use it to compose a catchy worship song, it's easy to forget that these verses come from a letter written by a man who is imprisoned and preparing for his own death. That's what makes this joy-filled letter so astonishing and remarkable. The context jolts us out of the kind of primary colour poster world that we think we might have stepped into with so much talk of joy. Paul is talking about joy from the darkness of imprisonment or the gathering twilight of death.

He seems to be working very hard to reassure a church he knows well that all shall be well, *even* if he, Paul, dies, and that the church *will* go on without him. He is reminding them of something foundational about the faith, that there is a joy deeper than any sorrow. We might ask how Paul can speak of joy in such circumstances without it seeming to be 'whistling in the dark'? And it's worth remembering that joy in such circumstances would have seemed even more jarring in the ancient world than it might even in ours. Joy was rarely mentioned in that Greco-Roman culture, except as an *illusion*. People then were even more sceptical about the possibility of joy than we are. Yet Paul wants to say that joy is the deeper reality, the reality that cannot even be obscured by suffering. Paul is painting a picture of a very different world, a world very much counter to this one. But this is something absolutely crucial for Paul, so much so that he makes sure we cannot avoid hearing what he is saying. Joy is so deeply part of the Christian witness that it cannot be erased whatever our circumstances.

Stanley Hauerwas wrote in his book *After Christendom*

'Rome could kill Christians, but could not victimise them. The martyrs could go to their death confident that the story to which their killers were trying to subject them – that is, the story of victimisation, was not the true story of their death..' (Abingdon, 2011, p.38)

The Roman Empire might be threatening Paul with death, but it could not erase his joy. The Christian story of joy cannot be quelled, even when death is imminent or suffering real. And Paul is not alone in witnessing to joy as being a founding experience of Christians. Another striking example is Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In a circular letter to his friends, in November 1942, he wrote;

“From early times the Christian church has considered acedia — the melancholy of the heart, or “resignation” — to be one of the mortal sins. “Serve the Lord with joy” (Psalm 100: 2) - thus do the scriptures call out to us. For this our life has been given to us, and for this it has been preserved for us unto the present hour.

...A sort of joy exists that knows nothing at all of the heart’s pain, anguish, and dread; it does not last; it can only numb a person for the moment. The *joy of God* has gone through the poverty of the manger and the agony of the cross; that is why it is invincible, irrefutable. It does not deny the anguish, when it is there, but finds God in the midst of it, in fact precisely there; it does not deny grave sin but finds forgiveness precisely in this way; it looks death straight in the eye, but it finds life precisely within it.

What matters is this joy that has overcome. It alone is credible; it alone helps and heals. ...

...Only in such joy in Christ the Redeemer shall we be preserved from hardening ourselves where human suffering encounters us.’ (Bonhoeffer, *Works*, vol. 16, *Conspiracy and Imprisonment: 1940–1945* Fortress, 2006, pp377–378)

There is something so powerful about such a witness to joy that comes from those, like Paul and Bonhoeffer, who really know what suffering is, who even know what it means to be close to death, and yet who can witness to joy. I would like to us to discover this kind of joy.

The poet and hymn writer Alan Gaunt, a self-described ‘Eeyore’, entitled his second hymn collection *Always from Joy* (Stainer & Bell, 1997) taking the phrase from a sonnet by Vernon Watkins,

‘Always it is from joy my music come  
And always it is sorrow keeps it true.’

(Lines from: To Certain Anonymous Poets, *The Collected Poems of Vernon Watkins*, ed. Brian Keeble) Golgonooza Press, 2000)

All worship arises from joy, but a joy that is forged in suffering and truth, not in whistling in the dark. It was said of the poet Christopher Smart, that he knew that sink or swim, he must praise always, somehow. And someone once told me that he believes in coming to church because even if we cannot change everything about the world, we can at least always ‘praise God’ and that this will help us to continue on the way.

In one of the catechisms to which our tradition looks back, to the question ‘What is the chief end of man?’ comes back the answer; ‘to glorify God and to *enjoy* him forever’ (see *The Westminster Shorter Catechism*, 1646-7).

And those Westminster Reformers agree here with the Roman Catholic Evelyn Waugh, who wrote,

‘The malice of sloth lies not merely in the neglect of duty but in the refusal of joy.’ (see ‘Sloth’, *The Essays, Articles and Reviews of Evelyn Waugh*, Methuen, 1983, p.573)

The religious life, the life of every disciple walking the way, is not like a hair shirt. It is a source of joy, deeper than any sorrow can touch and more enduring than any pain. There are some sorrows that no struggle will erase, no duty will solve, no work heal. But even these cannot stamp out the possibility of joy. I am repeatedly struck that it is sometimes those who have

suffered worst who know and treasure moments of joy and who know how to relish these true gifts and signs of God. We should never refuse the gift of joy.

I suggested at the beginning that we might think of joy not simply as something that, if we are lucky enough, we might experience, but rather as a *virtue* – or perhaps something more like a practice. And I think this is something we might learn from Paul's letter to the Philippians. Joy is something that his world rather despises as a possibility even in the best of times. Paul proclaims it repeatedly in his world as something Christians should 'do', as something that could even be commanded of us, as Jesus commands us to love. Few of us would expect people facing death to feel 'joy', but Paul evidently wants to tell this church he loves that this is precisely what he is doing. There is something about the authority of someone in his position which tells us that joy is possible, even in the darkest times. I would love to know whether the Christians at Philippi learned to practise joy.

In my own life, which like many of our lives, knows days of profound gloom, knows about the death of people and institutions, knows about the realities of depression and anxiety, I recognise now that I am called to *choose* and to *practise* joy, to rejoice always and again, and to enjoy God. Paul's letter calls me to the practise of joy. And I can't say to him, a man imprisoned by the Romans, 'you don't know what you are talking about', because he did and he does.

Often I look around the faces on the streets of my local town, and I look over the congregation on a Sunday sometimes, and I can see how hard we find it to practise joy. But sometimes I meet someone who absolutely knows what it means, and it is written into everything they do. And they are not necessarily, and in fact invariably are not, those with the most to be happy about. But they are living 'always from joy' and I see in them the reality which the Roman world scoffed at, but which Paul lived. I hope we can learn to practise that kind of joy, the joy that is deeper than any sorrow. And with Paul to 'rejoice always, and again I say, rejoice'. What would it mean to have a meeting like this one that was blessed above all by the practise of joy? What would it mean in days when the church is losing status and power in so many ways, to say, 'no matter, we are going to *enjoy* being disciples, come what may'? What might it mean for us to make a deliberate choice to make joy our discipline, our duty, a regular and conscious practice of our discipleship? I think that if God could give Paul the grace to do that from imprisonment, then we could ask for such a gift for our time and our place. I pray so.

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