

Joy

Chris Cheah
Advent 3C, 17 December 2006

Zephaniah 3:14-20; Song of Isaiah; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

On the third Sunday in advent we light a special pink candle for Gaudete Sunday, or Rejoicing Sunday. The usual explanation for this is that the austerity of early advent is softening with Jesus' birth at Christmas becoming more apparent.

Now while I quite like this, I must admit that I am a little suspicious about pastel pink being the colour being used. This is because I suspect that joy is one of those words that is in danger of being over-sentimentalised, especially in our culture, and turned into a tame, 'happy' word. By contrast, I think that real joy, when it happens, is a powerful and dangerous thing. It can be a bolt of lightning that can transform us. As we will discuss later, it can be very disturbing. Joy and its cousin ecstasy can both wake us up and, when they depart, leave a huge hole in our hearts.

But before scaling those heights, let's first start with a reflection on the more mundane notion of 'happiness'. This is probably more important because so much human behaviour, whether we are aware of it or not, is directed towards activities that we have been conditioned to think will make us happy, and to avoid things that will think we will leave us feeling unhappy.

In fact, without that kind of understanding maybe today's gospel reading doesn't make much sense. A non-Christian listening to today's readings could maybe be forgiven for wondering what the 'good news' in it actually is. Remember, John the Baptist peppers his call to his hearers — that they should repent — with a lot of other messages about how they are a nest of vipers; that the axe is ready at the tree base; that they need to change their ways; and that a time is coming when the wheat will be separated from the chaff in a great burning. Hmmm. Where's the happiness and delight in that? And surely that doesn't apply to us? We're Nice, no?

Actually, I suspect that the people that John the Baptist was talking to are a lot like us. That bunch sounds like it included lots of ordinary people, along with some more seriously hardened types like soldiers and tax collectors. My hunch is that this mixed bag of humanity had, until John appeared, much like most people do to day, been flailing around with various strategies and specific ways to become happy, without reflecting on that much.

One of my favourite Christian writers at the moment is an American Orthodox writer, Frederica Mathewes-Green who has written some very articulate and accessible material that I have found healthily clarifying. I'd like to read out some of her thoughts about what the root cause of this :

“What is this human condition? ... To take the most global approach ... it is the riddle of why none of us feels really at home in this world. We're not consciously aware of this uneasiness every minute, of course; with enough entertaining distractions, we can hold it at bay. But still it's there all the time, just under the surface, a murmuring unease. Almost unheard, but still persistent, it rushes to in the background of our lives like an underground river.

It can take different forms with different people. For some there's a vague, haunting feeling that we're always disappointing others; for others, it's that everyone else is always disappointing us. A lot of us feel like the world's in on a joke we're just not getting, and we just smile awkwardly and pretend to go along. Some of us are burdened throughout our lives with guilt for a severe and genuine evil we committed. Others feel peppered daily by twinges

over a host of minor offences, pursued as by a cloud of mosquitos.<

For all of us, I think, there is a recurrent sense of loneliness. Ultimately we are alone, humanly speaking, on this hurtling earth. Even in the most jovial and affectionate of families — and I speak from blessed experience — there remains a melancholy awareness that each of us fundamentally alone, encapsulated in a skin like a spaceman. Even when enjoying those whom we love most, we are looking through a pane of glass, and all the urgent longing of our hearts can't break through." The Illumined Heart — Chapter 1.

Well, if that's the problem — and I admit Frederica's description of it strikes quite a few chords with me — then what do most of us do about it? Frederica goes on in a later chapter to make the following observations:

We naturally cast about for ways to feel better and it's obvious that certain experiences — things we eat, or do, or buy — give pleasure. Keeping a steady stream of pleasures coming in seems the best way to hold off this malaise. This is a time-honoured solution, and an obvious one.

One element of our culture sets us apart from all previous ones, however, and that is our great prosperity. We simply have access to more consumables, more pleasures, than any previous generation. No king or emperor of centuries past lived as sumptuously as the average suburban family does today ... Since pleasures are so easily obtained and more affordable than ever we obtain them as frequently as possible. Thus we come to see ourselves primarily as consumers, rather than as people whose meaning comes from who we are or what we produce. Our prestige is defined by the logos we wear or the car we drive. ... we're black holes, never quite satisfied ... Yet we can't think of any solution to the malaise except to buy something else.

I call this the icing cycle. Imagine a person who decides to comfort herself with a can of chocolate icing. For a while it tastes, very, very good, and she feels better — and then she starts feeling a good bit worse. Submerged in bad, icky feelings, what can she do? Then the can's bright label catches her eye and she thinks "Chocolate makes me feel better".

This cycle of excessive consuming just adds to our lousy feelings. It is debilitating to see ourselves as passive, non-productive gluttons. But even to the sickness of too-much we can't see any solution except buying, acquiring, seducing, viewing, eating or drinking more. Self-esteem is wrecked by self-indulgence, because a million self-indulgences add up to a person you can't respect very much.

Thus, when we face eternal questions like "Why is the world so messed up?" and "How am I part of the problem?" we have a reduced pack of available answers. "Buy something and forget about it" is supremely seductive. It's also a more available solution than it was for our forebears.

Many well-intentioned sources try to help by addressing the symptom rather than the disease, offering advice on gaining self-esteem or losing guilt or becoming more assertive in our quest for extra icing. A good bit of the self-help section of any bookstore will be filled with titles about consoling and pampering ourselves, self pity titles, and advice on getting others to give us what we want.

Unfortunately, if we move over to the Christian bookstore, we will find much the same tone.

Here, I'm sorry to say, Jesus is too often offered as a consoler whose only purpose is to meet our needs. His focus is on us, and we are invited to take the role of unhappy child and bask in that doting care. ... It's true that Jesus is the only answer to this eternal problem, the problem of meaninglessness and loneliness. When the surrounding culture thinks in terms of "What can meet my need?" or "Where can I get the icing I deserve?" it's natural for Christians to say, "What you're really looking for is Jesus. He does what icing does, and more."

But the basic attitude of "How can I get what I want?" has still not been questioned. It hasn't even been recognised."

—*The Illumined Heart*, Chapter 5.

Enough of Frederica. I hope you didn't mind those quotations, but she has very articulately captured, I think, a large part of this whole 'happiness' problem. It also explains why John the Baptist's call to repentance is about happiness at the end of the day.

I reckon Frederica's right. The vast mass of people do suffer from the malaise she described, whether or not they see it. People aren't so much evil as have no idea where to find happiness. This is why we have global warming and wealth imbalances and the rest. It's because so, so many people are looking to be happy, but going about it by going outwards and fairly mindlessly trying to cajole or manipulate the outside world to give us stuff to make us feel better, and trying to protect themselves from the alternatives. I don't think this is deliberately bad, it's kind of instinctive. Most of us are sound asleep.

Amusingly, I was in Perth on Thursday night and in the hotel where I was staying they had one of those lifestyle magazines in the room. I'll pass it around, but if ever you wanted confirmation of all the different ways Frederica's icing gets offered up, and just how essentially un-nutritious this actually is in doing anything more than offering up temporary relief from the deep-seated malaise, then look no further than the cover! [Point out examples].

So, what's the solution? Well, surely it's internal, not external. Our minds need to be remade. We need to start to see how our own icing cycles work. It is actually really important for us to understand our own happiness triggers, because they unconsciously shape how we think and behave. We need to understand what we are attracted to, how we get ensnared, how all of our deep-seated patterns are directed at trying to assuage the malaise within us.

And how is this kind of internal change going to happen? Surely it has to start by making a decision (and probably remaking that decision many times) that such internal change is actually desirable. The main greek word used for repentance is metanoia which means to transform one's mind or, as St Paul put it, "be transformed by the renewal of your mind." The other greek word used in the gospels is metanoite which is maybe even more interesting and kind of means to rethink your life. I am increasingly coming to see repentance as being at least in part a kind of mindset (that needs frequent renewing) to accept personal responsibility for my own happiness, rather than assuming that the world can, or should, give this to me. And this needs to be made concrete in a practical kind of way. Hence John the Baptist's instructions about giving away one of your two cloaks, and only taking what you are entitled to, etc.

But of course as soon as one seriously steps down this new path, the enormity of the challenge starts to become obvious. While we do need to change the mindset to take personal responsibility, it quickly becomes clear that this is going to be a long term project and we cannot do it alone. We will need help. Particularly as the external world doesn't stop bombarding us with icing messages.

But, as we practice, at least we start to get a sense of what is going on. There can actually be a huge sense of relief that comes from realising what the largely hidden malaise in one's life has been, and that we've taken a right decision to try to no longer be sucked in. Secondly, there is a sense of relief, and indeed a growing sense of wonder, that a path has been laid out for us as to how this might be done. And thirdly, once this decision to change has been made, we have the assurance that a little baby will be born in a place — probably at first an obscure place — within us, and who, as we nurture him, will come to nurture us, and eventually to free us not only from the tyranny of the icing cycle, but also from the very malaise that started it all off.

So to summarise thus far, we have now talked about two of the main advent aspects of joy which are : (1) the kind of bitter-sweet joy that comes from and with repentance; and (2) the joy of sensing the Christ about to be born and will truly set us free.

I can't finish a sermon on Advent joy, though, without at least briefly mentioning two other types of joy that are hinted at by our other readings, particularly the Old Testament ones. I am doing this both to fill out the picture, and to reinforce, if that's now necessary, the caution not to take the pink candle as suggesting that Christian joy is sentimental. It's not. It's powerful and disturbing and transforming. All of which may add depth but is not necessarily fun at the time ...

You can tell this from some of the words that often get used along with joy. Words like 'bliss' and 'ecstasy'. Ecstasy in particular is interesting because it comes from two greek words ex — meaning 'out of', and stasis — meaning 'to stand'. Ecstasy means to stand outside of yourself. There are times in which we're taken, to a greater or lesser extent, out of ordinary, everyday life and its rather petty routines and transported into a kind of extraordinary state for a time. At those times, when we gain a greater understanding at some other levels of our being, and come into contact with real meaning, we actually intersect with something bigger. We all know that when we're taken out of ourselves we are part of something bigger than ourselves, that there has been a transformation, and that I am not just my puny little ego and its normal insecurities.

And then there is also another kind of joy that may not be as intense, but goes deeper still. The problem with ecstasy-type experiences is that they can leave those holes in your heart. We grieve their loss, and we want more. If this leads us to repentance — which is actually more of a conscious decision than a feeling — then these kinds of epiphany experiences have been the bait by which God, our lover, brings us home. But until that point there is always the danger of spiritual materialism as we secretly crave more profound and joyous experience for ourselves.

But as we continue to grow in the faith, and come home, our Scriptures suggest that we will move beyond even this. The greatest saints are clearly people who have moved beyond wanting joyous experiences for their own sake, and certainly beyond avoiding painful ones. They have learned the secret of sharing and giving and giving thanks : of living the two great commandments. Christian martyrs may not have been 'happy' as they were being often brutally killed, but there are many accounts of how they were actually experiencing joy at the time. We have a good example with today's Epistle reading. Remember St Paul told the Philippians : "Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I will say rejoice". Which sounds kind of ok, until we realise that St Paul really did mean always. When he wrote this he was a prisoner, who did not know his fate. And when he wrote this he knew from personal experience that the Philippian Christians, to whom he wrote, had to bear more than the ordinary share of persecutions.

Which again maybe shows up the differences between the worldly view of happiness and the transformed religious one. The world's view would be that happiness comes from following pleasure and avoiding pain. My impression is that as one grows into salvation, one also grows into a kind of deep faith-based joy that comprehends everything good and everything apparently painful and accepts it all, and in that joy, which comes from the Lord, blesses and transforms it all. That's when we know the malaise is cured. And, guess what, as that joy develops, it becomes the kind of profound peace that St Paul goes on to say in today's reading "passes all understanding", and the pure love that has transcended the self and passed over into God. And it is then that the malaise has been cured. We have found the basis for the only happiness that is real.

Now with all that under our belts, let's end by listening again to the prophecy that Isaiah made about the coming of the Lord. It is a prophecy about us and the coming time of our salvation:

"With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And on that day you will say: Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted. Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth. Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel."