

This morning we are going to think about joy, that's joy not happiness. It's a common mistake to confuse the two, particularly in this advent season. Most people want a "Happy Christmas", that is one free from the hassle, the angst, the disappointment and the pain that is so often are part and parcel of Christmas. Yes, it is perfectly reasonable to want a, "Happy Christmas" just please don't confuse it with a "Joyful Christmas".

So, what is the difference between happiness and joy? Well, the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham defined happiness as "the experience of pleasure and absence of pain." Since pleasure and pain are responses to our circumstances, the pursuit of happiness requires controlling our circumstances for the increase of pleasure and the reduction of pain. All the time, money and effort we put in to getting ready for Christmas is all about controlling our circumstances to maximise the pleasure and minimise the pain, so that we can experience a "Happy Christmas".

But here we run into a bit of a problem. There is only so much we can control—eventually, we are confronted with the reality that we just can't control everything. When we fail control everything, that is fail to increase our pleasure and decrease our pain we find our precarious happiness evaporating. This attempt to control life in the pursuit of happiness has left many "heavy laden", Christmas has become a burden for many. But fear not Jesus has a remedy for this sense of burden in **Matt. 11: 28** "*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.*" Perhaps this Christmas is the Christmas to stop striving for a "Happy Christmas" and start letting God make it a "Joyful Christmas"

So, let's go on to see what joy is all about. Whilst Scriptures has little to say about happiness but has much to say about joy. In fact, a search of "happy" or "happiness" in the ESV translation of the Bible finds only ten occurrences (none of them in the New Testament). By contrast, you will find "joy" or its derivatives more than four hundred times in the Bible, equally prevalent in the Old and New Testaments. Without question, joy is important to the Biblical writers and therefor God.

So, what is the joy the Bible talks about?

Firstly, joy is one of the “fruits” or characteristics that the Holy Spirit produces in our lives. Paul writes in **Galatians 5: 22 - 23** *“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”* Joy is there for a fundamental characteristic of a Believers lives through the working of God’s spirit within them. Joy is not the abundance of pleasure or the absence of pain. Nor is joy dependent on our efforts, rather joy is dependent on the inward working of God. This means we can experience joy regardless of what our circumstances are. This working of the Holy Spirit within to bring joy is why Paul could write in **Philippians 4: 4** *“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!”* Paul wrote of rejoicing and of being joyful from a prison cell in Rome facing the very possibility of receiving a sentence of death. So, why could Paul write of rejoicing in such dreadful circumstances? Well, because the Holy Spirit was working in him to produce joy even in that dark place and hopeless place.

A second feature of joy in the Bible is that it comes about through God’s saving work. God’s presence among his people is constantly active to seek and to save the lost. When people experience his salvation, joy flows in abundance. We see this with people like Mary whose spirit “rejoices in God my Saviour...for the Almighty has done great things for me” (Lk. 1: 47, 49). We see this in the three great parables of mercy in Luke 15 where the stories of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son all end in a rejoicing that flows from restoration, healing, and forgiveness.

What this teaches us is that joy is produced from God’s action in our lives that always moves us towards His glorious future that He has planned for us. God’s spirit is always leading us into deeper communion with each other and with Him. His spirit moves us from slavery to freedom, from darkness to light, from turmoil to harmony. God is always forming us to become more perfect in love. When God’s saving action brings this about, joy is the result.

A third feature of joy is that it is not just rooted in God’s work but also in the ways of God. For us to experience the joy God gives we need to embrace His way and not our own. For example, joy will be impossible if we act unjustly or ignore truth. St. Augustine insisted that “the happy life is joy based on the truth. This is joy grounded in you, O God, who are the truth”. Likewise, St. Thomas argued that all the do’s and don’ts of

the Gospel are for our joy. This is the invitation to order our lives along the domains of justice, truth, peace, and love. It is the way of the Beatitudes where Jesus teaches us how to be blessed. When we are blessed, joy ensues. Feelings come and go, but the fruit of a well-ordered life is blessedness, which leads to lasting joy. My brother Colin came to faith a couple of years after I did. Colin really struggled with all the rules and restrictions that he felt came with a commitment to Jesus as Saviour. He wrestled with the desire to do what he wanted and do and the desire to do that he knew was right. Colin was deeply unhappy and struggling, that was until he went to hear a visiting preacher. The Colin that walked back into the house was a very different to the disgruntled, struggling and unhappy Colin that had left it hours earlier. This joyful beaming Colin was quite a surprise. The preacher had explained that all God asks us not to do and all that God asks us to do is not because He is cosmic killjoy wanting to smother our fun but rather the do's and don'ts are to protect and prosper us. Suddenly the thought of living a life in the manner God demands filled Colin with joy. Living as God asks us to brings with it the joy of a life lived rightly before God.

The fourth feature of Joy in the Bible is knowing God loves you. Karl Barth (the renown 20th Century Swiss-German, neo-orthodox theologian) was asked if he could summarize his theology in a single sentence. Barth responded by saying, "In the words of a song I learned at my mother's knee: 'Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.'"

How can we know that Jesus/God loves us? Well, we find the objective evidence of the saving love of God and Jesus for His people is the cross on which Jesus died. The Apostle Paul made this abundantly clear when he wrote, "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8) and "The Son of God loved me and gave Himself for me" (Gal. 2:20). As St Augustine illustratively put it, "The cross was the pulpit in which Christ preached His love for us."

To know that we are loved by God, the omnipotent creator of universe is surely a source of unquenchable, never ending soul satisfying joy.

A fifth feature of joy from the Scriptures is that joy experienced in this life is but a shadow of that which awaits us in heaven: "No eye has seen; no ear has heard and

no mind has imagined all that God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor. 2:9). The joy of the present is an anticipation of the joy in the future where our destiny lies—to praise God forever in heaven.

Therefore, as we journey as pilgrims in this life, “let us rejoice in the Lord; for it is no small reason for rejoicing to have a hope that will someday be fulfilled”. We are an Easter people (even at Christmas!). Even now we possess the joy of the resurrection that draws us forward towards a future of joy with God forever.

A final illustration. In 1942 a British army officer was captured during the fall of Singapore. He was sent to work on the infamous Burma railway. He was placed in one of the brutal work camps where conditions were unspeakable with beatings, starvation, summary execution, torture and denial of any medical care or contact with the outside world. As a committed Christian he soon ran afoul of the guards who caught him praying. He was beaten repeatedly and given the worst job in the camp, the emptying of the camp latrines. The latrines were six feet deep pits over which wooden toilets were positioned and the men of the camp did their business. When the pits became full the waste had to be removed by digging it out and taking it to be burnt outside the camp. Emptying the pit fully involved getting down into the pit amongst all the filth and waste and digging the waste out. This was the worst job in the camp!

Yet years later the officer described this as a time of deep joy spent with God. As he worked in those latrines’ waist deep in filth the guards kept well away and even left him unguarded at times so he could pray and even hymns sing unmolested. Also, as his clothes and body became caked in the filth the guards refused to come near him even when he was not working in the latrines. This meant he was spared the daily beatings and brutality that the guards inflicted on the other prisoners. He became the freest prisoner in the camp, free to praise God and filled with joy.

This Christmas let us stop trying to control everything around us so that we can have a “Happy Christmas” let rest in God and all He has done for us. Let us rest in God’s love for us and let allow the Holy Spirit to work in our lives and produce a harvest of Joy. Let us not strive for a “Happy Christmas” but rather let us receive a “Joyful

Christmas". I leave you with Jesus's words we heard earlier "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." (Matt. 11: 28)