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Phil 2:1-4

John 15:9-17.

Joy.

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Many years ago, when my children were young, a wise Christian woman asked me “What do you enjoy about your life?”. Truthfully I didn’t know how to answer her. My upbringing had a strong Protestant work ethic, eldest child, be good, be responsible, always do your best. Enjoyment wasn’t talked about. I hope I gave my children permission to enjoy but during a recent conversation with my daughter she said “I think I’m looking for more joy in my life.” Perhaps we all are?

So “joy” what is it and how do we get it?

The social researcher Brene Brown says that it is vulnerability that gives birth to joy. She says joy is the most vulnerable of all human emotions, we long for joy but we are also afraid that if we allow ourselves to experience joy it will be whisked away from us.

This doesn’t sound like we are talking about anything superficial. As enjoyment or happy feelings can be. It sounds as if we are talking about something much deeper.

Enjoyment, happiness are great but they can be experienced at different levels. They are often transitory feelings in response to an event, a party invitation arrives in the post, these feelings can easily fade, 5 minutes later you spill coffee on your top! The happiness is gone! You get the idea!

Christian joy is something different. Something deeper. Jesus says “..my joy may be in you, and your joy may be complete”. Jesus’ joy in us, that’s what we are seeking. Not something that’s here one minute and gone the next. I believe joy is our destiny in Christ. Joy is a God given gift. It’s on the list in Galatians 5, part of the fruit of the spirit.

So Christian joy is not an occasional emotional high but a deep settled contentment that all is well no matter what our circumstances.

This is where we can learn from St Paul. His letter to the Philippians is described as his happiest letter. As we read it we pick up a joyful tone but it always brings me up short when I remember that he wrote this letter while he was in prison. Paul is joyful but none of his circumstances contribute to this.

Isn’t this amazing! Christians can experience Joy irrespective of circumstances, even in times of grief and suffering.

So what is going on for Paul that enables this? He’s been travelling and talking about Jesus for about 20 years by this stage. He been attacked, persecuted, criticised, he must have been exhausted. But everything he knows of Jesus gives him the assurance that Jesus didn’t just give new life to those who met Him during His earthly ministry. No it’s so much more! The life of Jesus continued and continues to spill out into the lives of all those who chose to receive Him. Eugene Peterson says “It is this spilling out quality of Christ’s life that accounts for the happiness of Christians, for joy is life in excess, the overflow of what cannot be contained within any one person.” Joy is life in excess. I like it!

Joy is something that will radiate from us. It's infectious, in a good way!

Joy needs to be expressed. A quick bible study reveals just how many references there are for "singing with joy". But if singing isn't your thing, how do we seek more joy in our lives?

2 areas come to mind.

Gratitude and love. As I have said joy is a gift from God. In fact the whole of God's economy is gift. The more we notice God's gifts to us the more we can choose to respond with thanksgiving. Gratitude opens the door to joy.

Did you notice both our readings link joy with love?

St Paul says "...if you have any comfort from His love.... then make my joy complete by being like minded, having the same love.."

John reports Jesus as saying "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Now remain in my love..... I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete."

The joy of Jesus in us. This is the joy that can be complete joy, full and lasting.

The late Dallas Willard wrote "As we grow in our capacity to love we will find that we have great joy". You see we are made by Love for love. Love that always seeks the good of the other. More love, more joy. This is the heart of our faith. This simple diagram is an attempt to illustrate this. Each member of the Trinity gives to the other in self giving love.

Receiving and giving love. Joy at the centre. This can be described as a dance of intimacy. There's a flow, movement. The jaw dropping reality is this isn't a private thing between Father, Son and Holy Spirit, there is an open invitation for each of us to join this dance. But it requires something that we find very difficult- surrender.

This shouldn't surprise us. Just think of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. How He struggled to face the cross. But He endured the cross for the joy set before Him ( Heb12:2). What was that joy? Us. We are His joy that we could be with Him for eternity.

When we know we are deeply loved by God, that actually is God's presence in us, God's joy in us and for us is what we will feel.

So I ask you

When do you feel most grateful?

What do you love and love to do?

When do you feel most alive?

When do you feel most free?

Keeping these questions in mind will help us open the door to more joy in our lives.

I began on a personal note so I'll end on one.

The greatest joy I experience is when I feel I have been able to be used by God for His purposes.

We are going to sing a song which points us towards the ultimate joy of the Christian life. This is the hope of joy we cling to. This is the hope that makes it all worthwhile.

