

EASTER JOY

Acts 10. 34-43

1 Corinthians 15. 19-26

John 20. 1-18

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

We are now officially told that it is a good idea to be happy. Politicians have started talking about happiness rather than just prosperity, there is even a research programme underway on the subject, trying to identify the essence of human well-being.

Now it's certainly a good thing that people have acknowledged that there is more to life than the level of our Gross National Product. It's when we try and put more flesh on the word 'happiness' that it becomes more complicated and a bit self-conscious. Some of you may just remember an episode of 'Doctor Who' a couple of decades ago, called 'The Happiness Patrol', where the Doctor arrives on a planet where it is a capital crime to be unhappy, and where blues musicians lead a dangerous underground existence. Less dramatically, many of us remember the uneasy experience of a family outing where things aren't going too well, and Mum or Dad saying through gritted teeth, 'This is fun, isn't it?'

There's the catch! The deepest happiness is often something that creeps up on us when we aren't looking. We can look back and say, 'Yes, I was happy then', and then find that we cannot reproduce those moments. Just as we cannot find true fulfilment in just loving ourselves, so we cannot just generate happiness for ourselves. Happiness comes from outside of us.

We have just heard the beginning of the resurrection story of our Lord, a narrative of shock and amazement and a story of utter disorientation. One of the things that

makes these stories so believable is precisely that sense of unexpectedness: the disciples do not arrive at the empty tomb and say, ‘Well, there you are; just like he said.’ They arrive never having really believed that Jesus would return from death, and now they find themselves in a disturbing new world where anything is possible; and the light in this new morning is so bright that even the familiar face of Christ becomes unrecognisable. As the story goes on in St John’s gospel, we are told that the disciples who anxiously gathered in their locked room were suddenly ‘filled with joy’ when they saw our Lord among them. The disciples are jolted out of the rut of what is usual and predictable; and joy springs on them without warning.

What was it like for those first few hours after the empty tomb had been found, after Mary Magdalene had delivered her breathless message? It must have been a period of alarming uncertainty, half-hope and half-terror. Would any of us really rejoice at the prospect of a miracle that would force us to rethink most of which we had taken for granted? But into this uncertain chaos steps Jesus, before whose face ‘the questions fade away’. And joy arrives, irresistible joy. Yes, the world is even more dangerous and stranger than it was before; and the future is now quite unimaginable. But there is nothing that can alter the sheer effect of Christ’s presence.

Authentic happiness – or joy – does not take away the reality of threat or risk or suffering. It is just there. It is more than a feeling. It is more than a passing emotion, and certainly more than a self-conscious determination to put a brave face on things. We must be clear: authentic happiness depends on something quite other than our efforts or will power. And that takes us into a further dimension of joy. What we can contribute to it is not our will or our effort, but simply a readiness to receive it. The person whose mind is completely cluttered with anxiety, worry, selfishness or resentment is going to find it hard to give way to joyful moments of gift and surprise. That’s why people who are fairly used to taking time in silence and reflection may often be people through whom you see joy reflected.

It's also why, for many of us (like the disciples at Easter) it takes something of a shock to open us up to joy, some experience that pushes its way through our inward clutter by sheer force and novelty. Perhaps part of the Easter message is very simply, 'Be ready to be surprised by joy; try clearing out some of the anxiety and resentment so that a joyful new world may find room in you.'

Ultimately, joy is about discovering that the world is more than we ever expected, and that we ourselves are more than we ever expected. The joy of the resurrection has a unique place in Christian faith and imagination because this event *breaks open* the shell of the world we thought we knew. It projects us into the new and mysterious realm in which *victorious mercy* and *inexhaustible love* make the rules. And because it is the revelation of something utterly basic about reality itself, it is a joy that cannot be at the mercy of passing feelings. Joy roots itself in the heart, and remains as a foundation for everything else.

The Christian is not therefore a person who has accepted a particular set of theories about the universe, but the person who lives by the *power of the joy* that is laid bare in the event of the resurrection of Christ. To be baptised 'into' Christ is to be given a lasting connection with joy.

Christian joy, the joy of Easter, is offered to the world not to guarantee a permanently happy society in the sense of a world free from tension, pain or disappointment. Christian joy affirms that whatever happens in our unpredictable world, there is a deeper level of reality. There is, if you like, a 'world within the world', where God's love and reconciliation are ceaselessly at work. Through the resurrection of our Lord, this 'world within the world' is made accessible to us; and it enables us to deal honestly and courageously with the challenges that are constantly thrown at us.

And thanks to the resurrection, we (like Peter and John at the empty tomb on the first Easter morning) are allowed to look into the darkness of the tomb for a moment; and to find that our world turned completely upside down. By joy.

Dear friends, Christ is risen!

Amen.