

Readings:

Zephaniah 3.14 – end

Philippians 4.4-7

Luke 3.7-18

Start by playing 'Don't Worry be Happy by Bobby McFerrin'

Don't worry, be happy... It's a great song... full of joy and warmth and, well, happiness...

But if you've ever, like me, been through depression, or anxiety, or even, just had a really bad day, you'll know the frustration of someone saying 'don't worry, be happy'. It's up there with 'cheer up, what's the worst that could happen', or 'why don't you just smile a little more' or 'what have you got to worry about' or ... well, you get the gist...

And that's all very much in my mind as today we reach the third Sunday of Advent, traditionally referred to as 'Gaudete' Sunday. The name comes the Latin translation of the first line of our Philippians reading "*Gaudete in Domino semper*" ("Rejoice in the Lord always"). It's the Sunday where we light the pink candle, where traditionally we'd give ourselves a small break from the penitence of advent and look towards the light of Christmas.

It's the Sunday where we think about joy and where the readings exhort us not worry about anything and instead to rejoice in the Lord!

But what if we don't feel like rejoicing today.....? What if we are tired, and worried, and in pain? Then what does Paul's letter to a church nearly 2000 years ago say to us?...

The Church in Philippi, was very close to Paul's heart. Whilst in Asia, he had woken one night with a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him to help them¹. And so he and Silas had travelled there. He'd been back at least once, if not more, and had a close relationship with them – they had been generous in providing for his missionary work... and now?

¹ Acts 16.6-10

They'd been grumbling and evidently two of their leaders had been quarrelling... They'd started listening to some false preachers who had distorted Paul's original gospel message... They were facing external threats and internal strife...

They were eagerly awaiting Paul's next letter; hoping, perhaps, he'd sort out all their difficulties... And they've listened attentively his exhortations to imitate Christ's humility and to do everything without grumbling...

And then, in the closing passages of the letter he writes...

"Rejoice in the Lord always..."² and "Do not worry about anything"³

You can almost imagine the gentle roll of the eye...

Really? Do we have to rejoice?

Not worry? Doesn't he know what's going on here?

And us too.. we can do exactly the same when we hear those words...

Don't worry? Have you watched the news...

Don't worry? Don't you know that the person I care most about in the world is dying?

Don't worry? Don't you realise that I can't afford to buy the children the presents they want and that our Christmas will be far from TV-ad perfect?

The answer, from Paul, would undoubtedly be yes... Yes, he has watched the news... Yes, he does know... Yes he has seen...

Because when Paul writes 'do not worry' it is not an empty platitude...

Because Paul himself has every reason to worry. Paul is chained up, in a dark and damp prison cell, with the threat of execution hanging over his head...

Paul knows what it means to be living through the worst of times...

² Philippians 4.4

³ Philippians 4.6

And yet he still calls the Philippians... He still calls *us*, to rejoice in the Lord always...

And we remember also Jesus, sitting at the last supper, about to leave his friends, knowing they will desert him, knowing that in a few hours he will be arrested, beaten and crucified...

And he says to his friends..

"I have said these things to you so that my *joy* may be in you and that your *joy* may be complete."⁴

Joy in the face of pain and impending darkness...?

Well, there's got to be something to this Christian joy... this rejoicing... something more than frivolity and cheerful happiness....

Because when Paul calls us 'not to worry' this is not a worthless platitude, trying to deny the depth of our pain, the intractability of the situation or the realness of our anxieties.

Paul does not deny that bad things will happen.

Paul doesn't say that our difficulties are God's will...

Or that better things are round the corner...

Instead he gives a remedy through the darkness.

*"Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God."*⁵

He exhorts us to share it all with God. To keep that relationship with God open...to come into that relationship with gratitude...

Christian joy acknowledges all of the difficulties, all of the worries, all or the pain,... and still calls us to rejoice...

⁴ John 15.11

⁵ Philippians 4.6

And the only way we can do that, is through the hope we have that things that can look different. The hope that there is more to life than difficulties and worry and pain. It is the knowledge that God, come incarnate in Christ Jesus, is waiting to transform the darkness to light...

It is this salvation, the saving work of God in our world, which turns the tide of Zephaniah's 8 oracles of judgement. 8 oracles reflecting the miserable state of society, that call for repentance and lamenting.. That speak about a day of the Lord's wrath... That decry a Jerusalem which has become corrupt and unfaithful...

And then, after these 8 oracles, everything shifts...

The lamenting is turned to rejoicing...

"Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter Jerusalem!"⁶

"The Lord has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies"⁷ the prophet continues... Salvation in the face of darkness...

It is this salvation, the saving work of God in our world, that mean that John the Baptist's cries that

*"His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."*⁸

Is good news⁹..

It is this salvation that means God's judgement is actually gospel... good news... good news for each one of us here today... Because it points to renewal, to tears being wiped away¹⁰, to the lowly being lifted up¹¹, to those who mourn being comforted¹², to a kingdom of justice and righteousness.

⁶ Zephaniah 3.14

⁷ Zephaniah 3.15

⁸ Luke 3.17

⁹ Luke 3.18

¹⁰ Revelation 21.4

¹¹ Luke 1.52

¹² Matthew 5.4

And so we find joy and we rejoice because we know that death and judgement are not the final word. Because we know that the darkness we see now is not part of God's plan.

Christian joy is not a dust sheet spread over to hide the pain. It is not unfettered naivety about how hard life is at the present time...

Instead, it is an act of defiance. It is looking into the heart of pain and saying 'still I rise'¹³....

Christian joy is not denying the sorrow and the suffering, but it *is* rebelling against them!

It *is* stubbornly refusing to be dragged into the descending darkness of the world around us...

And it is dwelling in the certain knowledge that the light of Christ is stronger

And it is knowing that, however faint it seems, that light still glimmers inside us.

Christian joy is elusive; it's finding that 'peace which passes all understanding'¹⁴ in the moments of our deepest anxiety.

Christian joy is unexpected; it's...

- the moments of bubbling laughter in the face of incurable sickness.
- the bolt of bright light shining through a dark and wind-swept day.
- a single rose blooming on a cold and frosty December morning.

But we can prepare fertile soil for those elusive and unexpected moments when we recognise with gratitude the ways we have been blessed and the gifts of grace and salvation on offer to us.

We can prepare that fertile soil when we recognise that, unlike the transitory glitter of wealth and health and prosperity and possessions, God is eternal.

¹³ Maya Angelou, "Still I Rise"

¹⁴ Philippians 4.7

And we can prepare that fertile soil when we remember that God **is** bigger than all the sadness and pain...

And we can fight...

We can fight for that joy, resisting the darkness that wants to drag us down and instead grasping out with outstretched fingertips to catch hold of those glimpses of light... those moments that catch us and reflect God at work in our tired and broken world.

In the end, Christian Joy is not the well worn platitude of 'don't worry, be happy' ...

Instead it is the surprising hope of a gospel spiritual sung in the face of slavery and oppression...

Instead it is 'singing the Lord's song in a strange and foreign land'¹⁵...

Finish by playing 'Down to the River to Pray by Alison Krauss'

¹⁵ See Psalm 137.4 and also Jürgen Moltmann, 'Christianity: A Religion of Joy'