

Sermon "Proper 21" 28th September 2014

Preached by Revd Caroline Sackley at Puy de Serre.

What does happiness mean to you? It's such a smiley word, and so many different things make us happy. Everyone wants to be happy, some believe we can buy things that will make us happy, some believe finding love, the right job, the perfect house will make them happy. But what happens when the party is over?

Joy is different, its deeper and stronger, it has been said that happiness depends on happenings but joy depends on Christ. Paul is writing a letter of joy to the church in Philippi.

It was written about AD 61 from Rome where Paul was imprisoned. Despite that it is a reflection of both the love and affection Paul feels for the Philippians and his expression of the real joy of a Christian life. The concept of joy or rejoicing appears 16 times in 4 chapters. Paul wrote the letter to thank them for a gift they had sent him and to encourage them, to reiterate that true joy comes from Jesus Christ alone.

The church in Philippi, Macedonia was the first church established on the European continent during Paul's second missionary journey. In chapter 3 he writes "that it is no trouble to write the same things to you again" . Often, we preachers worry about saying the same things to you over and over again, but, like Paul, the Bible is repetitive.

In chapter 2 he exhorts the Philippians to be of the same nature as Jesus Christ. The Jesus who taught constantly of loving one another as he has loved us, the Son of God and Son of man, who lived on earth, the servant King, the one who died for us.

We are asked to resist the urge to do things for praise or ambition. I think that is where we must be careful about "considering others better than ourselves". It is not that everyone else is more talented or superior, but that Christian love is about serving others, caring for others and not, as the disciples did, arguing about who is the greatest. In the same way the phrase about being 'like minded' and 'one in spirit and purpose', is not about uniformity of thought, but more about having common goals to work together, serve each other and spread the word of God.

The passage that follows is an amazing example of early Christology, and it has been suggested that it may have been a hymn in the early church.

Tom Wright in "Paul for Everyone – The Prison Letters" writes it out in this way:

This is how you should think among yourselves – with the mind that you have because you belong to the Messiah, Jesus:

Who, though in God's form, did not
Regard his equality with God
As something he ought to exploit.

Instead, he emptied himself,
And received the form of a slave,
Being born in the likeness of humans.

And then, having human appearance,
He humbled himself, and became
Obedient even to death,
Yes, even the death of the cross.

And so God has greatly exalted him,
And to him his favour has given
The name which is over all names:

That now at the name of Jesus
Every knee under heaven shall bow-
On earth, too, and under the earth;

And every tongue shall confess
That Jesus, the Messiah, is Lord,
To the glory of God, the Father.

Many of the rulers of the ancient world were also seen as divine, they were powerful and had military success. So this description, the actions of Jesus, were very counter-cultural. This is what the ruler of the whole world, not just an empire, looks like.

Paul describes a decision made, the incarnation and subsequent death on a cross, as showing what it really means to be divine. God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself as he died under the weight of the world's evil. Jesus did what only God can do, he became the perfect self expression of the true God. God, a crucified Jew, is quite difficult for many people both then and now to get their heads around.

We are told that crucifixions are happening again in Iraq, along with other atrocities. I won't comment on political decisions regarding the air strikes, although I have found some of the comments on the internet both for and against distressing, but these are complex decisions, carrying huge amounts of responsibility. One Muslim said on television that this is not being done in the name of Allah, just as many Christians feel that much that is done in the name of Christianity is not of Christ. These passages from Paul emphasise that. Christ is there in the beheadings and crucifixions, but not as the perpetrator, rather as the victim. He is there with the refugees, with the grief stricken and the injured, feeling their pain.

Despite all he is going through, all he has lost, Paul feels it is all worth it for the joy of having a relationship with Christ, he has his goal, that at all times he is working towards, knowing Christ better, growing more like him and having faith that through God, he would also be able to worship him at the eternal throne.

What is stopping us sharing Paul's values, that to know Christ and thus becoming more like him is our ultimate goal? What gets in our way? Busyness? Other relationships? Worldly values? Instant happiness?

Let us encourage one another in our discipleship, in sorting out our values and our behaviour. Let us help one another to know the deep joy of loving Christ so that all of our days are full of rejoicing. As Paul write in Chapter 4 " Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!"