

NORTHERN SCRIPTURE FESTIVAL

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JOY IN BELIEVING

Introduction

Before starting my presentation, I welcome everyone again and I thank the organisers for the opportunity to be part of this excellent initiative.

For the past five weeks, I was in Jerusalem, teaching the Gospel of John in the challenging context of Jewish–Christian dialogue. The experience included being there for the feast of *Succoth*, a harvest festival which ends on a joyful eighth day, called in Hebrew *Simchat Torah*, joy in or of the word of God in the Pentateuch. On the eighth day, faithful Jews are *commanded* to be joyful. If you're not feeling quite as effervescent as that, the tradition recommends taking a beer so that your feelings can catch up with your convictions. St Paul, good Jew that he was, would have approved. He himself commands the Philippians twice to joyful in the well remembered words " Rejoice in the Lord" (Phil 3:1; 4:4).

My plan for our session now is to explore Paul's teaching on joy in Philippians, following this sequence:

1. Seeds of joy
2. Realism
3. Resources
4. Philippians
5. The secret
6. And so....

1. Seeds of Joy

As already indicated, joy is built into faith right from the start. It is not just the feast of *Simchat Torah* but rather widely in the Bible, joy is commended. St Paul's expression "Rejoice in the Lord" is itself a quotation, found mostly in the Psalms but also elsewhere (Ps 35:9; 64:10; 97:12; 104:34; Isa 41:16; 61:10; Joel 2:23; Hab 3:18; Zech 10:7; Phil 3:1; 4:4). I suppose the organisers were inspired too by Pope Francis' insistence that we should be happy believers. For the moment we stay with St Paul.

In the uncontested letters, Paul has a rich vocabulary of happiness, which is listed here. There is a nice link with that carefree word, "hilarity," in English.

Cheerfulness (*hilarotēs*): 1
Cheerful (*hilaros*): 1

Happiness (makarismos): 3
Happy / blessed (makarios): 4
To rejoice (euphrainō): 3
Joy / cause of joy (chara): 19
To rejoice / be glad (chairō): 23
To rejoice with (sugchairō): 4
To delight in (sunēdomai): 1
Gladly, with pleasure (ēdeōs): 3

In a word, St Paul was that *desideratum*, a truly happy believer.

2. Realism

In our time, there are counter voices. St Thomas, in the *Summa*, had the habit of starting negatively. Some teaching would be proposed, for example the Trinity, and he responded with *videtur quod non*, it would seem not to be the case. In our case, it would seem that “joy” in believing is improbable, even escapist, and out of step with the times. I mention a few issues in passing, to set the scene.

We live in a time of “evangelical” atheism and this atheism sells itself very successfully in our culture. Christopher Hitchens’ *God is not great* is on sale in every airport, outside Islamic countries (because “God is great” is their great prayer). You will remember the London bus ads of a few years, “There probably is no god, so stop worrying and enjoy your life.” The implication is that faith leads you astray and gets in the way of living a full and happy life. I couldn’t imagine anything so contradictory: the whole business of living is totally devoid of meaning, absurdity rules, we are hurtling on space-ship earth towards destruction and we are suppose to cheer up?

We also know the experience of those who count themselves spiritual but not religious. In a word, I’m doing this on my own, thank you very much. The search for something more goes on, of course, and is registered in alternatives such as mindfulness or yoga or meditation. Within the Church, handing on the faith is far from successful. Last April, I found myself in Vercelli Cathedral (north of Italy) for Sunday Mass. Before the final blessing, the priest asked for prayers for the children making First Holy Communion on the following Sunday. He didn’t mince his words: *pregando che non sia l’unica e l’ultima* (praying that it may not be their only and last Holy Communion). This is just a symptom of a wider malaise.

The current tsunami of the on-going abuse crisis is also part of our reality. The greatest and lasting harm is done to the victims. The church has also harmed itself, its members and its ministers – not just because a percentage in ministry committed such crimes but even more so because the institution defended itself. Words such as anger, disillusionment, frustration come to mind. It will continue, in my opinion, for years and “continuing believers” need to brace themselves for unexpected aftershocks. At the

ordinary level, there's not much we can do. These are the times in which we are asked to believe.

More widely, we live at a time of tremendous upheaval.¹ This is not all negative but it does involve considerable change. This is true at the level of ethics, social behaviour, and politics. We may mention without pursuing it the chaos triggered by Brexit or the rise of populism on both sides of the Atlantic. It is not a pretty picture. Again, these are the times in which we are called upon to be believers.

3. Resources

Given the challenging nature of the times, what resources do we have? Let me mention a few and comment briefly.

Our own faith experience

We have our own experience of the faith. Like the man born blind in John 9, we can affirm, *"I do not know whether he is a sinner. I do know one thing—that although I was blind, now I can see."* (John 9:25) By his attachment to his experience, the man actually grows in the faith. He is a model for us all, in contrast with the man in John 5.

The community of faith

We are not alone. The Christian faith is communitarian by its nature. We received it from generations before us and we live our faith within the community of believers. We hope that future communities will share and celebrate the same faith. Such community confirmation of faith is not new. Already at the end of the Emmaus story, we notice: *So they got up that very hour and returned to Jerusalem. They found the eleven and those with them gathered together and saying, "The Lord has really risen, and has appeared to Simon!" Then they told what had happened on the road, and how they recognised him when he broke the bread.* (Luke 24:33-35)

The goodness around us

In spite of all the stories of woe, there is great goodness in the world. You can easily see this in young people, who care for each other and for our world. Young people are often extraordinarily generous. The open teaching of Jesus from last Sunday's Gospel can help us: *"For whoever is not against us is for us."* (Mark 9:40).

Teaching of Pope Francis

Happily, we live at a time when the bishop of Rome is also himself a happy believer. His vocabulary is close to that of Paul: *The Joy of the Gospel; the Joy of Love; Rejoice and Be Glad.*²

¹ *The Great Emergence - How Christianity is Changing and Why* (Baker Books, 2008) by Phyllis Tickle.

² *Evangelii Gaudium; Amoris Laetitia; Gaudete et Exsultate.*

The Word of God

Finally, we are supported, uplifted, challenged and nourished by the Word of God, always new. In this word, we hear *the very voice of the pilgrim people of God*, in the happy expression of Pope Benedict XVI (*Verbum Domini* §30). It is to this word that we now turn and, in particular to Paul's letter to the Philippians.

4. Philippians

Our exploration of Philippians will follow these steps, giving a little time to introduction and more time to the text.

- (a) A timeline for St Paul
- (b) Philippi
- (c) Philippians
- (d) Wider context
- (e) How does he "do" it?

(a) A timeline for St Paul

6 BC or thereabouts: Paul born

AD 33-36 or thereabouts: Paul encountered Christ

33-47: Paul was a local missionary around Syria and Cilicia

48-64/67: Paul took on his role as "worldwide" missionary and letter writer

This means Paul was approximately 40 when he encountered Christ. His work as an evangelist is in two periods, both lasting about fifteen years. The first period was quite local, around Syria and Cilicia. From the time, there are no letters. The second period, marked by the missionary expansion westwards, required constant contact and so from this second period, there are the letters we know today. When Paul began to write, he did so with a vast bank of experience: forty years as a faithful Pharisee and fifteen as Christ-believing Jew and missionary. It is no wonder the letters are so rich right from the start.

(b) Philippi

In Paul's day, Philippi had become an important city in the Roman Empire. Although founded by Philip II, the father of Alexander the Great and named after himself, the city was relatively unimportant until the building of the *Via Egnatia*, an important route across the north of Greece, joining Italy to Asia Minor. After the battle of Philippi (42 BC), the city became a Roman colony, with special rights. After the fateful battle of Actium (31 BC), enabling Octavian to become princeps and later Augustus, settlers from Italy moved there. It now had a grand title *Colonia Augusta Iulia Philippensis* and Latin was the official language.

(c) Philippians

Paul first set foot in Philippi around AD 49-52, en route to Thessalonica. There are echoes of that first visit in Acts 16:11-40 and 1 Thessalonians 2:2. Paul continued to maintain

links with the churches in Macedonia through Timothy (Acts 19:22-23; Phil 2:19-20). He made a second visit in the autumn in 54-55 and a third visit in the spring of 55-56 (Acts 20:1-3).

The letter that has come down to us has proved tricky to date and various alternatives are proposed:

Rome (AD 61-63)
Ephesus (AD 54-56)
Corinth (ca. AD 50)
and Caesarea (AD 58-60)

On balance, a Roman imprisonment seems most likely and, as a consequence, the letter is relatively late in the career and life of the apostle. The background to the letter can be folded in a few points:

- i. News of Paul's imprisonment had reached Philippi
- ii. Epaphroditus had travelled from Philippi and handed over the gift to Paul (4:18)
- iii. News of Epaphroditus's illness had reached Philippi (2:26)
- iv. Epaphroditus learned of the Philippians' deep anxiety at the report of his illness (2:26)
- v. Paul was about to send Epaphroditus to Philippi with his letter (2:25, 28)
- vi. Timothy would follow as soon as Paul had a clearer view of his affairs (2:19-23)
- vii. As soon as he was released Paul himself hoped to visit Philippi (2:24)

The letter has the usual outline, typical of Paul:

Verses	Letter	Speech	Salutations
1:1-2	Superscript		Greeting
1:3-11	Thanksgiving	Introduction	
1:12-26	Body	Statement of Facts	
1:27-30		Thesis	
2:1-3:19		Proof	
3:20-4:20		Conclusion	
4:21-23	Postscript		Greeting

The vocabulary of joy is limited in the letter but used extensively:

Joy / cause of joy (chara): Phil 1:4, 25; 2:2, 29; 4:1

To rejoice / be glad (chairō): Phil 1:18; 2:17-18, 28; 3:1; 4:4, 10

To rejoice with (sugchairō): Phil 2:17-18

He is not alone in this. Later writers register the same joy, as we see:

“Joy” occurs 59 times in the New Testament, and is esp. common in Matthew (6 occurrences), Luke (8), John (9), and in Paul (19, 5 each in 2 Corinthians and Philippians, none in 1 Corinthians).

“To rejoice” occurs 74 times in the New Testament and has theological significance esp. in Q (the sayings source between some 251 verses shared by Matthew and Luke), Luke, John, and Paul. Cf. “to rejoice with”: Luke 1:58; 15:6, 9; 1 Cor 12:26; 13:6; Phil 2:17-18

Philippians is Paul’s happiest letter and the affection between Paul and the Philippians is evident. At the same time, there are problems.

(d) Wider context

That evident joy has to be balanced as the suffering of the apostle, in the so-called hardships lists. These are found in Romans 8:35; 1Cor 4:9-13; 2cor 4:8-9; 6:4-5; 11:23-29; 12:10. The most comprehensive is 2 Cor 11:23-29. St Paul writes:

2 Cor 11:23 Are they servants of Christ? (I am talking like I am out of my mind!) I am even more so: with much greater labours, with far more imprisonments, with more severe beatings, facing death many times.

24 Five times I received from the Jews forty lashes less one. **25** Three times I was beaten with a rod. Once I received a stoning. Three times I suffered shipwreck. A night and a day I spent adrift in the open sea.

26 I have been on journeys many times, in dangers from rivers, in dangers from robbers, in dangers from my own countrymen, in dangers from Gentiles, in dangers in the city, in dangers in the wilderness, in dangers at sea, in dangers from false brothers, **27** in hard work and toil, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, many times without food, in cold and without enough clothing.

28 Apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxious concern for all the churches. **29** Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not burn with indignation?

In the case of Philippians, Paul is in prison (house arrest) and awaiting trial. He had hoped to move on to Spain and is delayed (probably finally prevented). Still the tone is very upbeat:

I thank my God every time I remember you. I always pray with joy in my every prayer for all of you because of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now. For I am sure of this very thing, that the one who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus. For it is right for me to think this about all of you, because I have you in my heart, since both in my imprisonment and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel all of you became partners in God’s grace together with me. For God is my witness that I long for all of you with

the affection of Christ Jesus. And I pray this, that your love may abound even more and more in knowledge and every kind of insight so that you can decide what is best, and thus be sincere and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God. (Philippians 1:3-11)

Already, Paul sees good coming out of his situation:

For it is right for me to think this about all of you, because I have you in my heart, since both in my imprisonment and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel all of you became partners in God's grace together with me. (Philippians 1:7)

The whole imperial guard and everyone else knows that I am in prison for the sake of Christ, and most of the brothers and sisters, having confidence in the Lord because of my imprisonment, now more than ever dare to speak the word fearlessly. (Philippians 1:13-14)

He is not unaware of the danger to himself:

...for I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ. My confident hope is that I will in no way be ashamed but that with complete boldness, even now as always, Christ will be exalted in my body, whether I live or die. (Philippians 1:19-20)

But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service of your faith, I am glad and rejoice together with all of you. (Philippians 2:17)

He is also aware that everything is as it should be:

Some, to be sure, are preaching Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. (Philippians 1:15)

...and by not being intimidated in any way by your opponents. (Philippians 1:28)

Do everything without grumbling or arguing, (Philippians 2:14)

Others are busy with their own concerns, not those of Jesus Christ. (Philippians 2:21)

On a very human level, Paul is worried because the Philippians are worried about Epaphroditus

But for now I have considered it necessary to send Epaphroditus to you. For he is my brother, coworker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to me in my need. Indeed, he greatly missed all of you and was distressed because you heard that he had been ill. In fact he became so ill that he nearly died. But God showed mercy to him—and not to him only, but also to me—so that I would not

have grief on top of grief. Therefore I am all the more eager to send him, so that when you see him again you can rejoice and I can be free from anxiety. (Philippians 2:25-28)

There are serious obstacles in the community itself:

Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh! (Philippians 3:2)

For many live, about whom I have often told you, and now, with tears, I tell you that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is the belly, they exult in their shame, and they think about earthly things. (Philippians 3:18-19)

Paul, the truly loving pastor, is not at all blind to the challenges. Finally, two people, otherwise unknown, are totally unable to get on with each other.

I appeal to Euodia and to Syntyche to agree in the Lord. Yes, I say also to you, true companion, help them. They have struggled together in the gospel ministry along with me and Clement and my other coworkers, whose names are in the book of life. (Philippians 4:2-3)

Both these women leaders are likely to be close personal friends of Paul.

In a word, there are indeed challenges:

- Pressure on Paul personally
- Pressure from civil society
- Pressure from those outside the faith
- Pressure from those within the faith
- Pressure from divisions and lack of harmony

It may help to notice that conflict is normal, not exceptional, in its various forms. The community without some conflict is likely to be either dead or in denial, that is, dead.

(e) How does he do it?

How does Paul respond? To see how Paul faces such challenges, we need to remember a few features of Pauline teaching.

1. *Core convictions of Paul*

Paul's core convictions take us almost to the faithfulness of God, disclosed in Jesus' death and resurrection:

More than that, I now regard all things as liabilities compared to the far greater value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things—indeed, I regard them as dung!—that I may gain Christ, and be found in

him, not because I have my own righteousness derived from the law, but because I have the righteousness that comes by way of Christ's faithfulness—a righteousness from God that is in fact based on Christ's faithfulness. My aim is to know him, to experience the power of his resurrection, to share in his sufferings, and to be like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. (Philippians 3:8-11)

2. *Paul's personal journey of transformation*

At the same time, he knows he himself is on a journey of personal transformation.

Not that I have already attained this—that is, I have not already been perfected—but I strive to lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus also laid hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself to have attained this. Instead I am single-minded: Forgetting the things that are behind and reaching out for the things that are ahead, with this goal in mind, I strive toward the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Therefore let those of us who are “perfect” embrace this point of view. If you think otherwise, God will reveal to you the error of your ways. Nevertheless, let us live up to the standard that we have already attained. (Philippians 3:12-16)

3. *Paul's capacity to use every situation for the Gospel*

For Paul, every situation can be turned to good, as we read:

I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that my situation has actually turned out to advance the gospel: The whole imperial guard and everyone else knows that I am in prison for the sake of Christ, and most of the brothers and sisters, having confidence in the Lord because of my imprisonment, now more than ever dare to speak the word fearlessly. (Philippians 1:12-14)

4. *Paul's personal freedom registered as “indifference”*

Finally, Paul is a truly free man in that he is radically undisturbed by what happens. This could sound like one of the popular philosophies of his day but Paul's “indifference” comes from his faith in Christ:

For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. Now if I am to go on living in the body, this will mean productive work for me, yet I don't know which I prefer: I feel torn between the two, because I have a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far, but it is more vital for your sake that I remain in the body. And since I am sure of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for the sake of your progress and joy in the faith, so that what you can be proud of may increase because of me in Christ Jesus, when I come back to you. (Philippians 1:21-26)

Our next three steps are vital:

5. The role of the evangeliser is to be the proclamation
6. Paul's models his faith and response for the Philippians
7. They, in turn, have to make their own journey of faith

5. *The role of the evangeliser is to be the proclamation*

Living in the world of paganism, where he can presume nothing, Paul realised that the role of the evangeliser has to be what she or he proclaims. This comes out in a few startling texts:

Be imitators of me, brothers and sisters, and watch carefully those who are living this way, just as you have us as an example. (Philippians 3:17)

I encourage you, then, be imitators of me. (1Corinthians 4:16)

Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ. (1Corinthians 11:1)

Cf. also 1 Thess 1:6; 4:14

6. *Paul models his faith and response to challenge for the Philippians*

The apostle "models" faith for his beloved Philippians:

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ. My confident hope is that I will in no way be ashamed but that with complete boldness, even now as always, Christ will be exalted in my body, whether I live or die. ... And since I am sure of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for the sake of your progress and joy in the faith, so that what you can be proud of may increase because of me in Christ Jesus, when I come back to you. (Philippians 1:18b-20, 25-26)

7. *They, in turn, have to make their own journey of faith*

Still, each believer and each community has to be its own journey of faith. No one can do this for another believer.

Therefore, if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort provided by love, any fellowship in the Spirit, any affection or mercy, complete my joy and be of the same mind, by having the same love, being united in spirit, and having one purpose. Instead of being motivated by selfish ambition or vanity, each of you should, in humility, be moved to treat one another as more important than yourself. Each of you should be concerned not only about your own interests, but about the interests of others as well. (Philippians 2:1-4)

Paul's overall response is clear:

- Happiness in believing comes through transformative acceptance of suffering
- Happiness in believing is not in spite of all the negative but precisely through it
- All these things are to be faced with the inner freedom that comes from faith and the faithfulness of Jesus

Because of that personal engagement and transformation, Paul is a happy believer,

Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say, rejoice! Let everyone see your gentleness. The Lord is near! Do not be anxious about anything. Instead, in every situation, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, tell your requests to God. (Philippians 4:4-6)

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law. (Galatians 5:22-23)

Such freedom and deep joy are not the result of denial or the fruit of a natural optimism but rather the corollary of engagement with Christ and one's personal transformation in him.

5. The secret

So what's the secret? It is wrong to put the rich experience and teaching of Paul into a few pointers, but perhaps this much might help to hold the essentials an.

- Centrality of Christ and God's grace
- Personal encounter and transformation
- Being what we proclaim
- Inner freedom to be able to embrace the negative
- Joy in not being bound by the conventional thinking and circumstances

6. And so...

The times are indeed challenging. They call for a new and deeply personal engagement by each one of us. Programmes and initiatives will help to a degree but we will not be "saved" by better programmes or advertising or even by having a webpage!! Instead we will be saved by letting ourselves be saved by Christ and and by then becoming what we believe and proclaim. Then the springs of joy will be open for us, as Isaiah said:

Isa 12:1 At that time you will say:

I praise you, O Lord,
for even though you were angry with me,
your anger subsided, and you consoled me.

2 Look, God is my deliverer!

I will trust in him and not fear.

For the Lord gives me strength and protects me;
he has become my deliverer."

3 Joyfully you will draw water

from the springs of deliverance.

Amen!