



A Message from Mark!

Time for Some Joy

13 December 2009 - Advent 3

Scripture: Luke 3:18 Philippians 4:4

He had been a slavish, religious fanatic, proudly racist, fearful of what he saw as heresies, anxious lest he break one of God's commandments, hating his own body, and angry at the sect known as Christians. But when on that road to Damascus, he was confronted with the blinding love of God in Christ Jesus, joy and liberty filled his being. Joy was the by-product of his new faith. It welled up unquenchable from the eternal, intimate Presence of God.

Years later, after being often flogged, shipwrecked on mission journeys, spat on, hounded out of towns, jeered at by intellectuals, scorned by his fellow Pharisees, pelted with stones, shackled in prisons; finally when he was held under arrest in Rome awaiting his trial and death, Paul was able to write to his friends. *"Always rejoice in the Lord. I tell you again: Rejoice!... The Lord is near. Have no anxiety about anything."*

Christian joy does not depend on life's circumstances. Its source is eternal. As we journey on the hectic, fast lane to Christmas, I'm going to try take a deep breath and journey with faith, hope and love. I invite you to do the same.

Happiness, profound joy, is the fruit of those who trust that the Lord has come, is coming right now, and will come at the end to complete our salvation.

Amen!! Thanks be to God!!

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*So, with much urging, John preached the good news to the people. Lk 3:18
Rejoice in the Lord always. I tell you again: Rejoice. Philippians 4:4*

Good news. Rejoice. Joy is a special happiness which wells up from deep springs. It is not superficial or fickle. Joy overflows in time, yet is the stuff of eternity.

This special happiness is the dominant theme of the 3rd Sunday of Advent. Our Old Testament reading (Isaiah 12: 2-6) is a song of joy. Paul in Philippians 4 celebrates the truth that the Lord is near. In the Gospel reading, John the Baptist preaches the good news, the gospel, to those who come to hear him. Joy is the theme.

If I were to ask many of my fellow Australians what gives happiness, their answers are likely to reflect the slick assumptions and illusions of the community. Things like:

- **wealth;** winning 'tatts' or being a millionaire by the age of 30. Plenty of money equals happiness.
- **being young;** hence the cosmetic industry is focussed on making us look younger than we are. To stay youthful equals happiness.
- **good health;** the massive market for health products witnesses to the assumption that good health equals happiness.
- **popularity:** To have admiring people around you, who flatter you. If possible, to be a sports star, TV or pop star, these equal happiness.
- **a good marriage:** To marry a person that you are in madly in love with, is supposed to guarantee happiness. Hence the happy ending people still demand in cheap novels, soap operas and romantic films.
- **having children:** regardless of the many couples who are now choosing not to have children, this remains a much wanted source of happiness for the majority.

I suggest to you that these would rate highly on the list of Aussie assumptions that are held about the sources of happiness. You may wish to add a few more like “**success**”, “**power**”, and the bedroom gymnastics which are euphemistically called “**good sex**”.

Clarification: Before I proceed any further, let me acknowledge the good in most of these assumptions. They have some validity.

- **Wealth:** there is no virtue in grinding poverty; some money helps our well being.
- **Youth:** the energies of the young are a considerable asset. Old age has its drawbacks.
- **Health:** only a hypochondriac would prefer disease to good health.
- **Popularity:** we all have a need to be liked and respected. Being unpopular is no fun.
- **Good marriage:** of course a love-match is a great start.
- **Children:** for most of us, kids are a wonderful privilege.

I’m not knocking these things. But are they really a lasting source of that deep, undercurrent of happiness which we call joy? Can they be relied on to deliver what we imagine they promise?

Sadly the answer is “no!” Common sense flatly contradicts the widespread assumptions about the sources of sustainable happiness. The roots of joy are not found in wealth, health, popularity, youthfulness, marriage, or having children. The evidence is otherwise; evidence that we all can see and hear.

For example: There are some parents who regard their *children* as a mistake. They can’t wait to park them on someone else and get on with their lives. On the other hand, there are plenty of childless people who know profound joy.

It’s the same with a *marriage*. Love matches can turn sour and some of those who expected a life of unabated happiness, end up hating each other. And even in the happiest of marriages, the soul still seeks something even more profound.

Then what about *popularity*? There are plenty of lonely and despairing super stars, for whom real joy remains an illusion. Some even resort to suicide.

And as for *youthfulness*, we’ve all met many joyful elderly people and have seen plenty of miserable young people.

The same can be said about *good health*. You can visit the gym and see dozens of desperately healthy specimens who are morose. On the other hand, in hospitals, nursing homes or in wheelchairs you can find some wonderfully radiant characters.

Lastly, there is the biggest furphy of them all: *wealth*. Common sense shouts at us that wealth doesn’t bring happiness. The world is littered with nasty, sour, ruthless, millionaires; who smile for the camera with their face muscles (but not with their eyes) while their souls are as arid as a desert. On the other hand there are millions of ordinary folk with just enough money to make do, who are a sheer joy to be with.

What really irks me, my friends, is that I find so many people of the church who get caught up in the same illusions as the secular world. And what irks me even more, is that I find myself day dreaming sometimes, sucked right in by these illusions. Yuk!

All the great religions of the world have said that happiness can only be found spiritually. For Christianity, real joy is to let yourself be found by the generous, supreme love of God in Jesus Christ. Joy is to know the love of God, to be treasured and cherished by the very Spirit who is the source of our existence. Joy is to lose the anxiety which is bred by slavish religion, or arid godlessness, and to find the liberty of the children of God. Joy is to know that in success or failure, sickness or in health, poverty or wealth, youth or old age, living or dying, our lives are in the hands of amazing grace.

“Salvation” is the word commonly used to describe the ministry of Christ in our lives. **Salvation has two meanings: rescue and healing.** Both of these apply. Christ rescues us from all the illusions and bondages that characterise those who are lost souls. Also, Christ, like a laser of grace, heals the depths of our being, restores us to health, enables us to bask and delight in the affection of God.

Our Lord Jesus Christ is the immense, liberating, healing love of God focussed in one human life. He is Immanuel, God-with-us. That’s what we’re preparing to celebrate again as we draw near to Christmas.

I return to the words of St Paul with which I started: *Always rejoice in the Lord. I tell you again: Rejoice!* Because of Immanuel, that devout but miserable fellow, Saul of Tarsus, became the joyful Saint Paul.