

Christian Joy
Isaiah 55:1-5, 10-13

I remember recently having a conversation with a few people. Somehow the conversation got around to discussing a woman who was known to be a very committed Christian, someone who attended church regularly and appeared to be very spiritual. She apparently was also someone whom no matter what she faced in life always found the positive spin. Life was good, she was joyful, she was happy. The people I was speaking to at the time felt that the woman was living in a dreamworld, that she was not being honest, nor authentic and was only putting on some type of show because even when she faced the devastating situation of the loss of a child her joyful demeanor remained intact. The people I was with thought she was being less than genuine.

While everyone else in the group seemed to agree that this woman must have had some type of problem or disconnection to the world, I was not able to immediately reach that conclusion. While I didn't know her I had certainly met people like her. I have met people who experience Christian joy so completely that their entire lives was shaped by that joy and a response to it rather than to the immediate circumstances of the world in which they found themselves.

I was lead to think about the nature of Christian joy from the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible reading for today. The 55th chapter from the Prophet Isaiah, which is our reading, is an eschatological poem. That means that it is a poem that is concerned with the things promised or assured to happen in the future. Eschatology means last things. The writer of this poem was speaking to the Hebrew children who were still being held captive in Babylon. He was trying to help them avoid getting stuck in the messiness and the turmoil of the unhappy world in which they found themselves by keeping an eye and expectation fixed upon the future, the liberation

Christian Joy

Isaiah 55:1-5, 10-13

that was promised to them. The message of the prophet to them was that that they were not going to be held in captivity for long. That Judah would be restored and that their covenant with the Lord was intact.

The eschatological promise of the future was bound not by what the Israelite or the prophet thought **might** happen but was shaped by an assurance of what **would** happen. The message of the prophet was a message from God. For the people the problem was that the eschatological promise was not always so clearly seen or felt when they were pressed to make a life in a world that was often too challenging or too hostile or too difficult.

In this chapter from Isaiah, this beautiful poem, the prophet reminds the Israelites of the power of God's word to make things happen. God's word has the power to call new realities into being; to challenge assumptions and expectations with that new reality. God's word, Isaiah promised, would not fall empty to the earth, would not cease to be without first being effective. God's word, according to the prophet, would do what God intended it to do. The eschatological promise of an end to captivity and a restoration of the land would be fulfilled. In knowing this to be true, Isaiah wanted his people, God's people, to receive the hope of joy, the expectation of joy. But to receive it not as something that would happen tomorrow but as something that in its promise of fulfillment should be celebrated and received today.

It is towards the end of this 55th chapter that the prophet, in speaking about the end of their Babylonian captivity says to the people, "For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace." They were to leave Babylon in joy that suggests to me that the joy was not something just to be experienced on the day of the departure but to be experienced where they were found at that moment. And in this way I've been lead to thing about the nature of Christian joy.

Christian Joy

Isaiah 55:1-5, 10-13

Since becoming a priest I have received my share of compliment, some of which I accept as sincere, and others I receive as flattery. I should also be honest and tell you that all of them, all of the compliments, are received by me with a grain of salt because the last thing I want to do is to allow any compliment to become more important to me than it deserves to be. That being said, I'd like to tell you that there is one compliment that I receive with the greatest reverence. The reverence is neither for myself nor for the person making the compliment. The reverence this comment inspires in me is a greater reverence for God. And it is connected with this idea of Christian joy.

Not long ago someone asked me what type of worship service I enjoyed the most. I answered that I always expected and looked for an obviously joyful worship experience and that I was saddened when I didn't find it. Now, this person never asked me what I meant by joyful and I didn't volunteer my definition but she seemed, nonetheless, to believe that she knew what I was talking about. As she continued to express her thoughts it became clear to me that her understanding of joy was different from mine. To my comment about joyful worship her response was that she found my answer surprising because she did not see me as a person always smiling and telling jokes and laughing. I was not naturally a jubilant personality so it seemed strange that I would be looking for that experience in worship.

Clearly we had different understandings of the meaning of Christian joy. What is Christian joy? Christian joy is made possible when we give our yes to the word of God. When we do as the prophet teaches and accept the eschatological promise of a future with God as a promise for today as well as tomorrow. It is living in the world today, a world that can be unpredictable and painful and harsh at times or joyful, and loving at others. It is living in the

Christian Joy

Isaiah 55:1-5, 10-13

world as if we have already received the prize for tomorrow, no matter how we find our condition at that moment. So that the transientness of what we encounter, is seen as just that, transient and is not capable of extinguishing the deep seated fulfillment and hope that is locked into and comes out of the word of God. Joy is called by God into our being.

Christian joy is not limited to a particular expression. It may result in exuberance. It may result in giddiness. Or it may not. It may result in laughter or it may not. It may be enthusiastic singing or it may be an excited prayer or it may not be these things. What it is, is an undeniable sense that at the core of who we are our soul is at peace. That the search for ultimate meaning and deep connection has been halted and peace within has become a basic part of our human nature. It is to find a genuine pleasure in living not dictated by the transient joy of that moment but in the expectation of a miracle. That in each moment we live there is an expectation that God will break through and we will see something totally unexpected, something totally unanticipated. And in that miracle we will witness the presence and the power of God.

Christian joy is living as if in each moment we will see a miracle and in that miracle we will witness God. So when I said that I look and hope for joyful worship I was saying this. I long for the worship experience in which I come before God with other Christians and together we not only anticipate the miracle to come but we experience it. Each time we see and feel a miracle. Each time we come together we experience the presence and the power of God and are moved to new level of reality, a new level of understanding. So that joy never results in complacency but in the expectation that there will be more if I allow myself to experience God's truth in more and more intimate ways and with greater understanding and insight.

Understanding and insight comes through a conscious exploration and study of Scripture,

Christian Joy

Isaiah 55:1-5, 10-13

through moments of prayer and meditation and through sharing my faith story with others so I can learn from them as they also learn from me.

Isaiah may have been telling the Israelites that going out from their captivity in joy meant they were to live each moment as if it were the end of their captivity. Each moment was a moment of joy. The richness of the joyful worship experience is directly related to the richness of the daily acts and feelings of joy that fill our lives from one moment to the next. This joy we experience as we live in the world outside the church because there, too, God will at any moment show us a miracle. And we expect it.

Earlier I said that there was one compliment that I found especially meaningful because it pointed so clearly beyond me and pointed to God. That was the compliment that when I lead in worship it is done with joy. There is no stronger testimony to God than for God's people to experience joy not only in worship but in daily life. Not to just experience joy as if it is a private matter between you and God but to experience it and share it as if it is a gift to you from God meant for the world. But it is especially important that we experience joy in worship because this is the time when we gather to say thank you and to remind ourselves of what it is that we have to be thankful for.

In the gospel of John Jesus says this to his disciples, "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete." To worship with joy and to live with joy is to honor God. To share that joy with others is to pass the gift along. I pray that we all will grow in our joy and that we always live to expect a miracle. Amen.