

Reflection October 11th

Paul's letter to the Philippians strikes a much more cheerful tone than some of his others.

There is perhaps a touch of disunity referred to though this could be contested, and overall it seems clear that Paul is both thankful for and excited about this particular church community.

The passage given us today reads like a blessing, and in fact is likely to form much of the words of blessing I will offer you all during your worship today. But the passage given us today also offers us much that seems hard to live up to. Words that seem evocative of a certain type of impossible positive thinking- the kind of thing we say but don't possibly have a hope of actually living.

Rejoice always!

Let your gentleness be evident to all!

Don't be anxious- just pray about it!

Think about honourable, just, true, pure, pleasing and commendable things!

Easy!

Though I think that these things can seem out of reach, I don't necessarily think this passage is a straightforward "follow my instructions and all will be well" type of thing.

Let's break each of these seemingly unreachable goals down.

What do we know about joy?

A lot, I hope. Joy is spoken of a lot in the church, particularly around Christmas time, maybe Easter, and throughout the special and exciting times in our lives, like weddings, births etc.

Joy greets us on the front of Christmas cards, in the faces of the assembled guests at your special day.

There are feast days that the church celebrates, like Christmas and Easter, days that we mark as a people of faith to remember things; the things which tell us our story, and remind us who we are, and these are often associated with the practice of Joy.

We walk through, and worship through full seasons of hope, longing, patient waiting, months of the gruelling walk to the cross and then the joy of the resurrection, or the eager, glowing anticipation of advent and the birth of hope itself, or the rush and roar of Pentecost and the dancing gift of the spirit.

The times of the church year when we are not in a particular season such as advent, lent or easter, are called ordinary time.

These are times of the year when we continue to move through the rhythms of our worship, still continue to hear the stories, to hear the words of Jesus, to learn and to grow together. Because there is a lack of background story to this time, because it's not dedicated to a certain purpose, in the way the other seasons are, it can feel a little arbitrary, or aimless or even dull.

Which actually is a lot like our lives sometimes. We strain forward towards the big things like Christmas, holidays, our children's birthdays, anniversaries, and when these things are over and we are just in the in between times things can seem much less shiny, or perhaps much less joyful.

And of course no one would fault us if we did find it difficult to locate joy in our simple every day existences. Life is often so many other things but joyful.

Our whole world is reeling from the virus that has decimated lives, economies, jobs, health, security and hope. We are distracted from the ongoing fact of climate change and the disaster awaiting the world that gently holds us.

politics in our country and others seems determined to hinge themselves on profit over people. and so on and so on.

We don't always want to rejoice, Paul.

Sometimes it seems there is little to rejoice in.

Let your gentleness be evident to all.

Also just really not an easy thing to do.

Some days we find gentleness as soon as we wake up. And some, we struggle from sleep like we were formerly dead, we stub our toe as we get out of bed, everything feels like a chore and we seem to be surrounded by idiots, or at least people who want to try our patience.

Some days we just don't feel like gentle could ever be a word used to describe us- we are awkward and angled and clunky and dark and this is not our word.

Why this word?

Well possibly because knowing how pointy and difficult all this feels to us sometimes it seems important to be gentle with all around us who may feel pointy and difficult also.

The word used in the Greek here could mean something more like equitable, or suitable. It's possible that English simply doesn't get to the root of what Paul is gesturing toward here. A post I read about this passage says it might be

something like “ an unflappable serenity and smiling good humour because of the nearness of Christ”.

And even this we can worry over because we can't always be unflappably serene.

Paul knows this. Paul is in prison as he writes this. he is not always unflappably serene, he does not rejoice loudly and constantly and his gentleness is likely not always evident to his prison guards.

Don't be anxious I don't need to go into, do I? we all know that is much easier said than done.

How do we reconcile a passage like this to the actual reality of our lives? Is it by trying harder? Forcing ourselves back again and again to gentleness? Screaming our joy at God even when the world seems determined to keep kicking that stubbed toe?

Honestly, maybe.

There are times we need to work hard to change our inner worlds. And I think there is something quite practical about praying when we're worried- we don't get to trust God by holding ourselves distant from God, and also much wisdom in the last part of the section- whatever is good, whatever is worthy etc- it makes sense that if you spend time with the good, the pleasing, the pure the commendable the worthy of praise that this will be better for our hearts and souls and lives. Focussing our thoughts on healthy stuff is just good brain management.

But I also think we work ourselves too hard sometimes trying to join the dots of our lives to these sort of aspirational quotes from Paul and forget that that's not necessarily what he wanted. For a start he was writing to a little church he loved a lot, to encourage them. He wasn't writing to you to make you feel bad. And for another, we forget that a lot of this stuff isn't left up to our tired selves trying our best to be a positive influence for another hour a day.

I was having the darndest time writing this sermon all week. Which is why it's come to you a little late, in all likelihood. Some weeks preaching on a passage about joy, demonstrative gentleness and right thinking seems quite definitely out of reach and you find yourself wondering why it is that you have chosen this passage to preach on.

But then my dog pounced on me and tried to lick my face and made me laugh harder than I had all week and I was reminded that joy is sometimes separate from us, or it occurs in spite of us.

And then I read lovely words from a friend of mine reminding me that our lives, our baptisms, the grace that flows through us like blood are all gifts too, and are acts of the giver not dependant upon those receiving.

I was wondering if maybe we could read this all in a different way
Maybe we can rejoice in the Lord because it is our Lord who is equipping us to rejoice. After all, the things that are true during the church's festival days are always true; we dwell in the promise of resurrection, in the presence of the spirit at all times, and we are made by the love of Christ, formed by the works of God rather than having to form ourselves by acting cheerful when we just don't feel like it.

And maybe we can rest into the gentleness offered to us by Jesus who walks beside us, who is always near. Maybe gentleness too can be a gift we are given, rather than a goal we fear we may not meet. Perhaps rather than a reminder that the boss is close by so we should get our act together, the words "the Lord is near" are simply the truth, and furthermore a comment on the source of our gentleness.

I was thinking recently about the point of worship. Like, why do we do it. My friend Alister's take is that there is not exact point to it; it simply is. He likens it to play, which children will engage in as easily as they do breathing. While there may be developmental benefits to certain types of play, we all know that's not the point.

For most children and sadly many less adults, there is life, and therefore there is play. So Alister says it goes for humans. It is in us to worship, depending of course on your definition. But if worship, as it might be, is simply the turning of yourself toward awe, toward a noticing of the sacred, beholding something bigger than yourself and reacting appropriately, then I think he's right. We all worship something, and I think this is because it is built in to us to celebrate, to fall to our knees, to laugh and to sing with joy, to love. It is in our nature to rejoice, simply when we are being who we are.

Living is a complicated, painful, brightly coloured, overlapping, messy thing. We run and touch one another and feel light on our skin and hear our own voices say things we don't understand. We want to simply live but this is

impossible as everything we do it seems impacts on others. Nothing about living well is easy. Our Lord knows this. Paul, our writer and encourager knew this.

I don't read this passage or this book as an instructional.

I read this as a letter to a group of humans who were caught up in the heady journey of being a community of faith. Because that's the other thing to remember about this letter; it's to a group of people. Sometimes you'll find it hard to rejoice, but others can maybe do it for you. You are not trying to live all this alone. We might find rejoicing hard, we might find right thinking hard, we will definitely find it a challenge to always be gentle with each other, but when we fall, others are standing to help us up. When we can't find words, others are there to sing them to us softly, joyfully. When we forget where to look, our community is nearby, pointing to the source of all that makes us human, all that brings us back to the truth of who we are.

And when we are anxious, we can fall back on the knowledge that God has us. We can't do all this. No one expects us to.

Animals are enough in and of themselves and in some ways we are too, but we aren't designed to be roaming fields on our own. Paul is exhorting people to be a community and exhorting them all together AS a community because we are designed to be in this together.

If there are three things you hear out of this potential shambles of a reflection, let them be the following:

1. You are being formed for all of this stuff. You don't need to be joyful to get God onside.
2. You are being formed as a community- you are never alone. and
3. It is ok if you do not feel like it. If you still haven't got the point where you think 'oh yeah, that's it, I can feel it welling up'. If you're still with Paul in prison, or with Jesus in the earth, or with Thomas asking for proof- all of that is ok. You do not need to be cheerful to love God, or to be one of God's children. And I firmly believe that if you are doing the best you can and that is simply getting up and getting through the day, then that is a form of rejoicing anyway.

So rejoice, friends. You are being formed for gentleness and joyful living, even when it doesn't feel like it. The earth itself is rejoicing all around you. The things that are true when we all sing the cheerful songs are still true when we don't want to. Thanks be to God for that.