

A NOTE OF JOY

A sermon preached on the Sunday after Christmas, 31 December 2023, at Christ's Church Cathedral, Hamilton, Ontario, by Bishop Terry Brown. Texts: Isaiah 61:10 – 62:3, Psalm 148, Galatians 4: 4-7, Luke 2:22-40.

For nine months of 2020, during the first round of Covid, I lived with three Anglican Franciscan brothers in a small friary attached to a parish on the southside of Brisbane, Australia. Because we were few, we continued with the daily office and daily Eucharist, even when the parish had to stop having services. Part of the morning office included a reading of the Society's Rule, one portion each day, spread out over a month. I reckon I heard it read eight or nine times, not enough to make me join the Society, but enough to be shaped by it. For several days, we heard of the three "notes" of the Franciscan life: humility, love, and joy.

The sequence fascinated and challenged me, shaped as I had already been by St. Paul's somewhat different sequence of faith, hope, and love in 1 Corinthians 13. In the Rule, one was called to live with humility, love, and joy, starting with the simplest virtue, simply being humble and not full of oneself, then moving to works of love, and, finally, embraced by and embracing joy. But we do not do it all ourselves. The "notes" are a grace or gift of God. To quote one version of the Rule,

The humility, love and joy which mark [our] lives are all God given graces. They can never be obtained by human effort. They are gifts of the Holy Spirit. The purpose of Christ is to work miracles through people who are willing to be emptied of self and to surrender to him. We then become channels of grace through whom his mighty work is done.

Those words are worthy of much reflection.

In reflecting on today's readings for the Sunday after Christmas, which are all very much about joy – in Isaiah and the Psalm, joy at the coming of the Messianic reign; in Luke, joy at the birth of the Messiah: and in Paul, joy at the birth one who frees us from slavery and oppression – I was reminded of the three Franciscan "notes" and that joy does not come in isolation, but is part of a broader Christian life, and, ultimately, a gift of God, not something that we manufacture.

It is so easy in the Christmas season to try to forget the world and all its travails, or our personal struggles or sadnesses, and feel we must manufacture a special Christmas joy to replace reality. Certainly, that is often the way western popular culture treats Christmas – parties, special recipes, decorations, the ideal family party, and Boxing Day sales; now with the season already finished, I am told that Valentine's Day items are already on the store shelves, ready to promote the same process with romantic love.

Joy is not that simple, and if we think it is, we are bound to be disappointed. Genuine Christian joy is deeper and more meaningful, ultimately a gift, not something we manufacture or use as a shield to hide from reality. Indeed, joy can come out of sorrow.

As Mary comes to the Temple for her Purification in today's Gospel, offering the poor woman's sacrifice of two doves, rather than the rich woman's sacrifice of a lamb and a dove, Simeon, one of the two witnesses to the small child who is the Messiah of Israel, hints that even in his great joy at seeing Jesus, there is future sadness in the lives of both Jesus and Mary. Simeon prophesies to Mary: "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul, too." Jesus will become controversially involved in the politics and religious life of Israel and lose his life on the cross; who his genuine followers are will be revealed; and Mary will witness her son's death on the Cross. Yet, in the end, Simeon is still joyful.

Like Palestinian or Ukrainian Christians in this Christmas season, we cannot deny that massive injustice and violence exists here and now, both globally and locally. In Hamilton, we cannot deny the homelessness, poverty, and hunger around us. We may have global friendships with those who struggle with poverty or homelessness or unemployment. Nor can we deny that we live in a culture of loneliness. Nor can we deny the anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and racism around us. In such situations, whether we are right or wrong, it is easy to express outrage, especially on the social media. But the social media is often an echo chamber which global and even local powers simply ignore. In the end, in this season of the Incarnation, the celebration of the presence of the God of Love in human history in the person of Jesus Christ, it is better simply to be genuinely present wherever we are and not just speak but *act*, even in the smallest way.

The Cathedral Café's six days a week ministry to those on the streets, the wonderful Christmas dinner provided for those who would have none otherwise, our welcome of strangers and refugees, and the many other ministries of this cathedral and churches around the diocese (and other churches, faiths, and organizations) embody this Incarnational principle of being present.

The Franciscan "notes" remind us that we are to minister with humility – I suspect it wouldn't take much for some of us to be on the streets ourselves – and with genuine love, and joyfully, not with resentment. ("The Lord loves a cheerful giver.") Our ministries are our response to God's love in Jesus Christ. And I am sure each of us has ways, perhaps known to God alone, in which we reach out with presence and love to others.

The global scene these days, I believe, is more difficult. We can try to understand difficult contexts from reliable sources, including our church partners. We can extend aid and support through the Primate's Fund and other reliable agencies. We can write thoughtful letters to politicians and the media. We can support or join advocacy groups. We can vote wisely. We can develop empathy with those we do not understand or, perhaps, even despise. We can

listen. At times, perhaps all we can do is pray and lament, and pray that the Holy Spirit will guide us along and that God will act.

But no matter what the situation, we have the promise of a Messianic Reign of Love and Justice of which we are a part; that in the end, divine Love will triumph, and injustice and violence be overcome. The nations of this world cannot say that; they will falter and fail. Every small action makes a difference. Pope John XXIII was fond of quoting the adage, "Drops of water wear away the stone."

This presence, this reaching out, our ministry, our service, help us not to concentrate overly upon ourselves and our own private disappointments, but to move beyond ourselves. In the words of the Franciscan Rule, "The purpose of Christ is to work miracles through people who are willing to be emptied of self and to surrender to him. We then become channels of grace through whom his mighty work is done."

Here is the link between the Manger and the Cross that can never really be broken. The vulnerable Infant, consecrated to God in the Temple in Jerusalem, lovingly raised by his parents, eventually proclaiming and embodying the Messianic Reign, is headed for suffering and death on the Cross. Thus, *our* ministries also must embody self-sacrifice, giving and not always receiving, and a constant openness to the Holy Spirit, always willing to be present and to act.

Of course, the Cross also leads to the Empty Tomb and the joy of Christ's Resurrection from the dead. Here is our Baptismal Ministry, dying and rising with Christ in living Christlike lives. And God gives us the joy of Resurrection, both Jesus's and ours.

A final note. When I was a young and foolish theological student, I remember arguments about which divine action was most theologically significant in Christianity. There were three contenders: the Incarnation (the Word made flesh in Jesus), the Atonement (Jesus's salvific death on the Cross) and Jesus's Resurrection from the dead. It was said, with some truth, that Catholic Anglicans based their faith on the Incarnation, Evangelical Anglicans on the Atonement, and Eastern Orthodox Christians on the Resurrection. Identifying with the first group, I was an avid student of Incarnational theology.

Nowadays, fifty years later, I believe differently. I believe it is all *one* story of salvation history: the fulfillment of a Jewish Messianic prophecy in the Word made flesh, Jesus the Christ, present, teaching and ministering in the complex and violent world of his time, who offered himself freely to sacrificial death on the Cross, and who was raised in glory by God. And that whole sacred story invites us to become part of it and live it through our Baptisms. At Christmas we celebrate a special part of the whole story, but we do not forget the other parts. And as we live the whole story, God gives us joy, the joy we celebrate today. In the words we have heard from Isaiah, "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my whole being shall exult in my God," and from the Psalmist, "Let [us] praise the name of the Lord, whose name only is exalted, whose splendour is over earth and heaven. The Lord has raised up strength for this people and praise for all loyal servants." So let us be open to God's gift of joy and be glad. Thanks be to God!