

Joy in the depths

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 17 December 2023

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Advent 3B; (Gaudete – Rejoice! Sunday)

Luke 1: 26-38; Contemporary Reading: *Gaudete* by Brad Reynolds

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

I imagine many of us know the old Gospel campfire and children's song '*I've Got That Joy, Joy, Joy, Down in My Heart.*' The tune itself is upbeat, catchy, and hard to forget. We might try singing it now, perhaps responsorially:

*I've got that joy, joy, joy, down in my heart
Where?
Down in my heart?
Where?
Down in my heart to stay.*

The song has other verses too, including having '*the peace that passes understanding*'. One version also has one voice about dealing with spiritual distress. It goes like this:

*If the devil doesn't like it, they can sit on a tack
Ouch!
Sit on a tack
Ouch
Sit on a tack today.*

Of course, the song is hardly great poetry. It does however reflect the great spiritual gift of Joy which we celebrate today, and which is central both to Mary and the story of Jesus' birth, and to spiritual life as a whole...

Do we know divine Joy in the depths of our lives? Can we sing Mary's song of joy, the Magnificat, out of the depths of our own experience and struggles, and those of the world around us? That is the invitation of this Sunday in our Church year. That is why it is called, in Latin, Gaudete, or, in English, Rejoice Sunday, in order to centre us on spiritual joy as at the very heart of the Christian Good News for the world. For, in the various denominations of the Western Church, the word Gaudete is traditionally proclaimed as the first word of worship: '*Gaudete in Domine semper. Iterum dico, Gaudete*' as the Latin Missal expressed it for so many centuries – or, as we proclaimed at the outset this morning, '*Rejoice, always. Again, I say, rejoice!*'

The words come from Paul's words from Philippians chapter 4, verse 4: one of many verses which reflecting how intrinsic spiritual Joy is to the good news and Spirit of Jesus. Symbolically, it is also expressed in the rose-pink liturgical colours used in many churches this Sunday, also represented in the pink of the third Advent candle lit today.

Now, let us be honest. Part of us as individuals and part of us as a community may easily balk at letting ourselves open fully to the gift of Joy in our lives. After all, we may say, even if we ourselves are not facing various personal struggles, how can we celebrate Joy in the face of the struggles of our world today. If so, we are hardly alone. In the face of current troubles, the successful writer and performer Tim Minchin thus understandably says, in a recent interview,¹ that he is *'obsessed with this question... am I allowed to enjoy my life?'*

As he reflects, it is easy to feel as if we are drowning in all kinds of suffering. Yet, he is surely right, isn't he, in also saying that *'we can't all suffer for everything all the time.'* It might indeed seem brutal to have a switch off. However, in Tim Minchin's words, we *'need to not be consumed by the world to be able to give people joy, to contribute to the other side of the ledger.'* Spiritually speaking, this is the point of Gaudete/Rejoice Sunday, which encourages us to open ourselves to the gift and pathways of spiritual joy in the depths of Christianity.

Our Gospel reading today introduces us to part of the joy of Mary, such an emblematic figure of divine Joy in the Christian spirituality. Indeed, among other titles, Catholic spirituality has called Mary the Cause of our Joy, as the bearer of Christ – our ultimate Joy. Taking up key moments in Mary's story in the Bible, such Christian spirituality has also long offered what it calls the practice of the Joyful Mysteries to us, as a way of entering into the depths of Joy in God.

You do not have to use a rosary, or use it in a conventional sense, to be able to draw on God's grace through such spiritual practice: reflecting on such great moments in Mary's life as the Annunciation, told in our Gospel reading this morning; the Visitation, reflected in our exhibition around our walls; the Nativity, almost upon us; the Presentation of Christ; and the Finding of Christ in the Temple.

Note well, Mary's story, and the practice of entering into spiritual joy, is not about ignoring or evading suffering and struggle. Immense struggle and deep suffering are constant undercurrents in Mary's life. In the Annunciation, Mary is at the centre of a very queer promise and pregnancy: one that turns her life, and that of others, upside down; which will involve shame and rejection; and which, she would have known, is about the fulfilment of the prophecies of the Suffering Servant. The Visitation recalls the ultimate violent fates of both children in the wombs of Elizabeth and Mary.

The Nativity takes place in a world with no room for strangers or the divine 'other', in the midst of colonial occupation, and genocidal destruction. At the Presentation, Mary is further told a sword will pierce her heart, and three days of distress lead up to the Finding of Christ in the Temple. Again, and again, when rightly understood, the biblical narrative and the best of Christian spirituality offers practices and pathways to name, and own, our own similar experiences of suffering and struggle, and, thereby, by the grace of God, be enabled to transcend them.

Key to understanding the Joy at the heart of the Christian Faith is to recognise it as a gift of God's grace, and as one of the fruits of the Spirit to which St. Paul referred (eg in Galatians 5.22-23). In other words, it comes from sharing in God. This is at the heart of today's Gospel reading. Mary is indeed transformed with joy. This joy however is not simply one of feelings, but of will, and of her whole being. Mary's response to the angel of God reflects her desire for God. Joy then followed. Mary was seeking God with all her heart, irrespective of what would result.

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2023/dec/09/tim-minchin-interview-bio-life>

So it is for each of us. We cannot simply 'muscle' our way into joy, for ourselves or anyone else. Yet we can open ourselves more fully to divine grace, and, in this, joy rises up from the depths, irrespective of our situation.

Following Jesus and Paul, great Christian theologians have explored this extraordinary gift of joy from the depths and offered us such helpful guidance. Thus, as Thomas Aquinas expressed it, in our handling of life, we need to distinguish between emotional joys, which are typically fleeting and hard to maintain, with spiritual joy, which is a gift of grace. Only in the depths of divine Love, can we truly find substantial, lasting, joy. As Aquinas put it, '*since charity (aka divine Love) surpasses the proportion of human nature... it depends, not on any natural virtue, but on the sole grace of the Holy Spirit.*' The Joy which we celebrate and proclaim today, on this Gaudete Sunday, thus arises from the depths of such relationship with God, and is reflected in those, like Mary, and other great saints, who have sought first the 'kingdom', the 'dreaming', the Love of God.

Let me therefore, in concluding, offer two particular recent examples of spiritual Joy, who, like Mary, also faced great struggles and suffering, yet whose focus enabled Joy to well up from the depths. As self-acknowledged '*mischievous brothers*', the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu had a wonderful relationship, reflected in an irrepressible shared Joy, despite their destructive contexts of poverty and oppression, exile, death threats, and solidarity with the marginalised. This, as some of you will be aware, is recorded in books and articles, and also in a film entitled *Mission: JOY, Finding Happiness in Troubled Times*.²

Amid their many differences, at the heart of their common gift of Joy is/was their lived experience, born of deep spiritual practice, of living by what Christians call grace, as manifest in the story of Mary today. Desmond Tutu put it this way, through living insightfully: '*you can overcome the most horrendous circumstances and emerge on the other side not broken.*' Like Aquinas and other great Christian teachers, Tutu also made a distinction between surface emotional joy and spiritual joy from the depths. For, '*when you say you are pursuing happiness,*' he observed, '*you are not going to find it*'. Rather, as the Dalai Lama has expressed it, from his own experience and lived tradition, '*ultimate source of happy life – inside, not outside.*'

Divine Joy is of course in no way separated from Justice. The inside is not apart from the outside. It is rather that the gift of grace from the depths, in the inside overflows – as with Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama – in joy and justice-seeking, in loving kindness on the outside.

This surely is beautifully expressed in that powerful song of Mary we know as the Magnificat. For Mary sings of the divine Joy to which she has opened herself and which lives inside her, and this provides the energy and encouragement to speak of divine transformation outside of her, in the struggles and sufferings of her own, as of every age.

So may we indeed know Joy, joy, joy, deep in our own hearts and world, and, when the negative forces of despair and gloom threaten to overwhelm us, let us find ways to tell them to go, sit on a tack!

In the name of Christ, who suffers with us, and sculpting us into shapes of joy and purpose. Amen.

² <https://missionjoy.org/> and elsewhere!