

The Advent Course - Session Three

JOY

Welcome. Here we will take a little Advent journey through the virtue of Peace in the Christian Tradition. Beginning with Scripture, then moving into Art and ending with prayer, we offer these thoughts and meditations for your reflection and your own prayers. Note down the things that chime a bell or make your heart flutter.

“Joy does not simply happen to us. We have to choose joy and keep choosing it every day.”

Henri Nouwen

Scriptural Joy

Being in a good mood is really great and most languages have lots of words to describe the experience like happy, cheerful, joyful, and so on. The same goes for the languages of the Bible in ancient biblical Hebrew there's a variety of words like SIMCHA, SASON, GIL, in the Greek New Testament there's cara, euprosyne. Each word has its own unique nuance but they all basically refer to the feeling of joy and happiness. Now what makes these biblical joy words interesting is noticing the kinds of things that bring happiness and also seeing how joy is a key theme that runs through the whole story of the Bible.

Let's start with sources of joy. On page one of the Bible, God says that this world is very good. So naturally people find joy and beautiful and good things of life, like growing flocks or in abundant harvest on the hills, the poet of Psalm 104 says ‘a good bottle of wine is God's gift to bring joy to people's hearts’, people find joy at a wedding or in their children. There's even a Hebrew proverb that compares the joy



that perfume brings to your nose with the joy a good friend brings to your heart.

However, human history isn't just a joy-fest, the biblical story shows how we live in a world that's been corrupted by our own selfishness, it's marked by death and loss. And this is where biblical faith offers a unique perspective on joy, it's an attitude God's people adopt, not because of happy circumstances but because of their hope in God's love and promise.

So when the Israelites were suffering from slavery in Egypt, God raised up Moses to lead them into freedom and the first thing that Israelites did was

sing for joy, even though they were in the middle of a desert, they were vulnerable, the promised land was still far away, they rejoiced anyway. Later biblical poets look back on this story and they remembered how the Lord caused his people to leave with joy. His chosen ones with shouts of joy. This joy in the wilderness was a defining moment, a way of saying that the joy of God's people is not determined by their struggles but by their future destiny. This theme appears later in Israel's story when Israel suffered under the oppression of foreign empires. The prophet Isaiah look for a day when God has raised up a new deliver like Moses, that's when those redeemed by the Lord will 'return to Zion with glad shouts with eternal joy crowning their heads, happiness and joy will overtake them'. And while the Israelites waited, they chose joy to anticipate their future redemption.

This is why it's significant that when Jesus of Nazareth was born. It was announced as good news that brings great joy. We're told that Jesus Himself rejoiced and gave thanks to God, his father, when he began to announce the kingdom of God. He even taught his followers have the same joy in the wilderness, saying, when people reject to or persecute you for following me rejoice, be very glad, because your reward is great. After his death and resurrection,

Χαρά cara

Εὐφροσύνη
euphrosyne

Jesus commissioned his followers to go out and announce the good news that he was the Risen king of the world. And as they did so the early Christian communities were known for being full of joy, even when they were persecuted, like when the Apostle Paul was sitting in a dirty Roman prison, he could say that he's chosen joy, even if he gets executed. He called this the joy of faith, or joy in the Lord and he believed it was the gift of God's Spirit a sign Jesus' presence is with you inspiring hope in the midst of hardship. And when you believe that Jesus's love has overcome death itself, Joy becomes reasonable in the darkest of circumstances. Now this doesn't mean that you ignore or suppress your sorrow, that's not healthy, or necessary. Paul often expressed his grief about missing loved ones or losing friends or his own freedom. He called it being full of sorrow, and yet, rejoicing. As he acknowledged his pain he also made a choice to trust Jesus that his loss wouldn't be the final word. This is very different from the trite advice to 'turn that frown upside down'. Christian joy is a profound decision of faith and hope in the power of Jesus's own life and love, and that is what biblical joy is all about.

simcha שמחה

ששון sason

Joy in a Time of Uncertainty,
a meditation by The Rev'd Petra Shakeshaft



Pictures: Sunflowers by Vincent van Gogh

Vincent van Gogh is not usually an artist to be associated with Joy, but these sunflowers were painted during a period of optimism that was rare for him. He was waiting for his friend, the artist, Paul Gauguin to join him to realise his long-held dream to begin a working community of artists in Arles.

For van Gogh, the colour yellow was the colour of happiness. The house in Arles was called the Yellow house, which boded well for Vincent and the series of sunflower paintings were painted to brighten up the walls of the interior. Later, he saw them as wings of a triptych, either side of La

Berceuse (The Lullaby), a painting of Madame Roulin, the wife of the Postmaster, rocking her child's cradle. They would be like the candles of an altarpiece, burning on either side of this mother image, his own version of the Virgin Mary.

The flowers show the cycle of life, death and new life. There are buds, flowers in full bloom and flowers whose petals are dropping, with the seeds ripe and ready to fall and begin the cycle again. As with his series of Sower paintings, we are reminded that his life and imagination were steeped in the Bible. Death, life and new life were concepts he explored and reimagined time and time again.

The Bright Field – R S Thomas

I have seen the sun break through
to illuminate a small field
for a while, and gone my way
and forgotten it. But that was the pearl
of great price, the one field that had
treasure in it. I realize now
that I must give all that I have
to possess it. Life is not hurrying
on to a receding future, nor hankering after
an imagined past. It is the turning
aside like Moses to the miracle
of the lit bush, to a brightness
that seemed as transitory as your youth
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.

Joy 2020.

Monoprint with gold thread, The Rev'd Petra Shakeshaft



A field of sunflowers is a joyous thing. They stand basking in the warmth, turning their heads to face directly into the sunlight. Many of us have relished the unusually long, hot summer this year – it has seemed like a kind of recompense for the restrictions imposed by the lockdown. The leaves and flower heads were collected towards the end of the summer on walks – with time to search and harvest from nature's generosity.

Choosing shapes and textures to press into the inks, finding colours, blues and oranges of the late summer skies and scorched fields, a reminder of the long walks with time to observe, to notice and enjoy aspects of nature that often go unseen.

Birdsong and breezes, ripening corn, blackberries ... almost ready.

These are the bright sunlit memories that we carry into the long winter nights, another lockdown, the season of remembering death and human brokenness and a time of waiting;

Advent waiting;

How long, O Lord, how long?

But the seed, always the seed.

The promise of a new joy, born into the darkness of another winter long ago...always the seed, the new joy waiting to be born again in us.

White Cup and Saucer by Fantin-Latour

A Meditation on Joy - by Rev'd Dr Nicola Bown



The satisfying series of concentric circles, formed by the cup space and the base of the saucer, the rim of the cup and the edge of the saucer, the shades of white used to give the cup shape and solidity.

I'd like to suggest that this picture, simple as it is, is an image of joy. It is not exuberant and it's not

celebratory, it doesn't tell a story, it doesn't have a message.

This picture is so simple; a cup and saucer with a teaspoon resting on it. There is nothing else here. The background made up of chestnut browns and darker browns suggest a table top and in the top right corner is the artists signature - Fantin-Latour - the nineteenth century French artist better known for his work of intricately decorated flowers.

Yet this simple picture composed in just three colours, small and unassuming, nevertheless tells us something important about joy. The joy that comes from the rightness of things being what they are. The joy that comes from simplicity and the paring away of all that is not essential.

If you go to see this picture in the Fitzwilliam museum in Cambridge, you have to come close to it because it is very small. A handspan across perhaps. As you look at the picture your eyes rest on the delicately curved handle of the cup, the facets of its sides, the shadow it throws on the saucer, the gleam of reflected light on the spoon's bowl and the tip of its handle.

The joy that comes from knowing the one thing needful and necessary and beautiful. The joy that comes from holiness. Joy that's got little to do with happiness or celebration. But comes from fixing our eyes on what is true. A picture of a simple cup and saucer on a table. Perhaps this could be an image for us, of a life lived for God, that is indeed an image of joy.

Reflections

Rejoice always,
pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances;
for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

* Think back and remember a time when you felt really joyful

* Advent is a time when we hold in tension the darkness and the coming light. In a world that feels very broken and uncertain, where can we look for joy?

Make a prayer space using things or images that give you joy. If you draw or paint, you could make your own images. You could make little prayer cards (as before) with words of joy, images or names of people who have brought you joy. Offer prayer of gratitude and put them in the prayer bowl.

Name a few simple joys - the small and uncomplicated things that bring you life. What happens if you think joyfully about your faith in the simplest and most uncomplicated ways.

God of all joy,
we come before you in praise and thanksgiving for all who have brought us joy. Lead us from the darkness and uncertainty of this world into an Advent of expectation that the light will come, the light has come and will not be overcome. We pray that through prayer and reflection and through your grace the Christ-child may be born in us anew this Christmas. Amen

Prayers

Loving Lord,

I know that in Your presence is the fullness of joy
and at Your right hand are joys for ever more.

Thank You for the joy I have in You,
through the blood of Jesus Christ my Saviour,
and thank You Father, for the peace and love and hope
that I receive from You so freely as Your eternal gift of grace
to all the faithful.

How it rejoices my heart and guards my mind,
with each passing day.

Lord, I pray that I may draw
from Your living wells of salvation day by day,
and that my joy may be full to overflowing in Jesus,
just as You have promised to all that Your children.

Thank You for the joy of the Lord,
which is my strength and stay.

Help me always to rejoice in Your joy and to remain in Your love,
so that my joy might be full and so that Your joy may well up in my
heart and overflow to others, to the glory of Your name.

Amen.

**May God bless you with a heart full of joy
and I look forward to next week when we will explore love**