

Reflective Worship – Sunday 2nd January

Joy

Psalm 16

Today in our series of small words with big meanings we are thinking about joy.

When we were looking at the letter of James last year we thought about many things – our attitude to hard times, our actions, our words, our possessions and our prayers – but one verse in the letter we never really looked at was verse 2 in chapter 1.

My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy

Now this verse might seem like an odd place to begin some thoughts about joy. It goes against all of our natural assumptions. How can we be joyful when we are going through trials and difficulties? How can we be full of joy when things are stacked against us?

Maybe when we think of joy we think of parties, family celebrations, Christmas, holidays, sunshine and beaches, mountains, hills and seas, times when all seems good and positive. We equate joy with happiness, fun and laughter. Not difficult times, challenging times or times of suffering. But perhaps it is as we explore a verse like this one that we can begin to see the true meaning of joy.

Yesterday was the funeral of Archbishop Desmond Tutu. On your chair this afternoon I have placed a photo of the great man. It's a photo that to me shows that he was – perhaps above all things – a man who radiated joy. Can you remember ever seeing a photo in which he wasn't beaming? Nor can I. And when I look at his picture I don't just see a superficial happiness – I see a deep and profound joy. But his life wasn't easy. Born and brought up not in abject poverty, but not at all well off. Living in a country where, just because of his colour, he was discriminated against.

He progressed from being a church minister, by his own choice not involving himself in politics, to being a great advocate on the international stage for peaceful change towards an inclusive, just and fair society in his beloved South Africa. In his own life he faced trials; as one of an oppressed group he experienced hatred and suffering and discrimination; as the chair of the truth

and reconciliation commission he heard countless stories of abuse and atrocities. And yet he remained full of joy and brought glory to God. He was fully alive. He brings to mind what the 2nd century church father Irenaeus said “the glory of God is a human being fully alive”

Fully alive. Full of joy. How could he remain full of joy when there was so much pain and suffering around him, when he heard of such hatred and abuse?

In Psalm 16 the psalmist talks of his relationship with God. Its one of those great psalms of encouragement; one that can lift us to new heights again when we are feeling low. One that reminds us that what really matters is how we stand with God. We read in the psalm *In your presence there is fullness of joy*. Perhaps these few words can say more to us than most about what real joy is.

Joy is about experiencing the presence of God. It is about God loving us unconditionally and welcoming us into his presence. It comes therefore not from what is going on around us but from God himself. Which helps us understand why we can be full of joy even though things might not be going well. Because even in those situations God is still with us; his presence has not deserted us.

No doubt this is what Desmond Tutu could testify to – that he was loved by God not for anything he did or had done, but for who he was - and because of that love he experienced the presence of God. And this is true for each one of us. God loves us for who we are and not for what we might have or might not have achieved. And because of that we can enjoy living in his presence. As Philip Yancey, an American spiritual writer, said *nothing you can do can make God love you more and nothing you can do can make him love you less*.

Another verse worth pondering here is the wonderful verse Galatians 5:22 where Paul talks about what the fruit of the spirit is. You can no doubt recall the words . *the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control*.

This reminds us that when we are filled with God’s spirit – when we truly are living in the presence of God – than we will produce the fruits of the spirit; the fruits that mark out the way that Jesus lived. We will become more like Jesus. More the person God wants us to be.

Perhaps when we think of the fruits of the spirit we think about love and patience and peace, but maybe less about joy. But Paul makes it quite clear here that joy is one of the fruits of the spirit. Not happiness but joy. Joy in who we are and what God has done for us. Joy brought about by living in the presence of God. And joy which overflows from us into the world around us. Joy which makes a difference to those we spend time with. Joy which can change the world.

On the reverse side of the picture of Desmond Tutu you will find some Bible references where we can read about joy. These are just a small selection of the many! They each have something to say about the presence of God and how living in God's presence changes the way we are.

Isaiah 55 talks about the overflowing joy at God renewing his covenant, his promise with his people. It uses the vivid pictures of mountains singing and trees clapping their hands – exuberant with joy.

There are several references to joy around the Christmas story. John the Baptist leaping for joy in the womb of his mother Elizabeth because he was truly in the presence of God – Jesus himself. The message of the angels to the shepherds – I bring you good news of great joy – because God has come to live among you. The reaction of the Magi to being in the presence of the new King of the Jews, Jesus himself.

In John chapters 15 and 16, where Jesus talks of him going away and then returning (in the person of the Holy Spirit) he says there will be joy that no one can take away.

And there are many more bible passages in which I hope you will be able to recognise this theme of joy brought about by being in the presence of God and the joy that overflows from us because of that presence.

We will put some quiet music on now which will give us a chance to look at these verses and others that we may know where the joy that comes from being in God's presence is spoken about. A chance for us to reflect on what it means for us to live in God's presence and to think about how that can help us radiate his joy to the world around us – a world in desperate need of such joy.