

*“Your joy no man taketh from you.” (the Gospel).*

Maybe warnings which I give are of problems you have never encountered. If so, sorry, but I think they may be important. In this case, the danger is that we think that Christianity obliges us to feel joyful. It might of course be some other feeling - the belief that we are obliged to feel miserable is equally dangerous. Having the “right” feelings is not very important in leading a Christian life. The season of Lent is about repenting (changing our lives) much more than about being sorry for ourselves; the season of Easter is about rejoicing (living our lives thankfully towards God) much more than about being happy.

There are many reasons in our present experience why we are not joyful. We all know how much that was familiar we have lost from our religious life. We all suffer the pressures of a society which does not understand us, sometimes is hostile to us. We watch with horror the confusion in the Church of Rome and the collapse of historic Anglicanism. We have the sheer difficulty of keeping going; and besides all this, any personal problems which each may have.

All this is true, and the Bible allows us to express it to God - see Psalm 88, which is one long expression of misery. Indeed, we find in the Gospel reading the Lord warning his disciples that they will have to face sorrow. Such warnings are written for us as well as for the first disciples.

They are warned of sorrow; and it seems that there will be no joy without the sorrow coming first. Now one response to this is the meditative technique of thinking yourself into the experience of the first disciples - trying to relive their experience. Far better teachers than I have encouraged this, but it is not the only form that the Christian sharing in the death and resurrection of the Lord can take, and trying to work up appropriate feelings won't do much to bring us nearer to God.

There is always a danger that that it is so much easier to share in suffering than in joy. St. John has no wish to hide the suffering; but that isn't the end, that isn't the point. Rather, “your sorrow will be turned into joy”. We must not linger in the agony, for that is not where the story ends. There is a cruel death indeed, but then a resurrection, not just back to the old life (like Lazarus) but to new life.

This is a matter for joy, and that joy is valid whether we feel joyful or not. Valid, for the resurrection has happened, and what has happened cannot be taken away. Valid, because this is not just a remarkable story about one person. The resurrection applies to all the faithful. In St. John's terms, this is true because “I am the door” and Christ holds that door open to us. “I am the way” and “no man cometh to the Father except by me” - and Christ has opened that way to us. Similarly, the epistle to the Hebrews understands Christ's work as that of the “pioneer” who opens the route to the Father. We are to rejoice, then, because the way is open; God has given us the right of access to Himself.

How then should we respond? “We bless thee . . . for thine inestimable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ; for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory. And we beseech thee, give us that due sense of all thy mercies, that our hearts may be unfeignedly thankful.”

God does not give to all of us at all times to be happy. God does enable us, even if it has to be in the midst of distress, to offer thanks. We should in our prayers at this time both in church and at home remember that Christ has arisen for us; death of the body remains, but the victory has been won.

*The sermon relates to the Gospel*