

The Joy of Fulfilment

Readings: Luke 24:36-48; Acts 3:12-19

It is quite appropriate that today's theme is 'The joy of fulfilment' given that last Friday many of us were at the Bishopdale College Graduation ceremony where we were joyfully celebrating the achievements of the students and the fulfilment of their time of study.

We don't talk a lot about joy do we? Love, peace, hope faith even; yet joy is second only to love in the list of fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5. We are supposed to be a joyful people, even us Anglicans! Well, I hope you will see as we go through the Bible passages set for today something to be joyful about.

Before we do that, let's pray.

Prayer: Loving Father, may Your Holy Spirit speak to us this morning so that our minds may be renewed and our lives transformed as we are shaped by your Word into the people you have called us to be. Through Christ, our Lord and Saviour.

Amen

I don't know if you have been watching the coverage of the Commonwealth games, but if you have you will have witnessed plenty of joy when hopes and dreams have been realised; all the weeks and months of training have paid off and the athlete finally gets a medal – hopefully the gold. But there have also been moments of despair and disappointment.

We will see both extremes as we look at the Scripture passages for today.

Let's start with Luke 24.

There is an incredible amount packed into this chapter: first we have Luke's story of the resurrection: the women and then Peter visit the tomb and come away wondering what on earth had happened to the body.

Then we have the story of the two disciples travelling from Jerusalem to their home in Emmaus. They are puzzled, distraught and in despair over the arrest and death by crucifixion of Jesus, the one they hoped would redeem Israel.

Finally we have the account which is our passage for today: the disciples are gathered together still trying to make sense of what has happened when suddenly Jesus is there standing in front of them; they are petrified and think they are seeing a ghost.

Now, those of you that know the story well will have realised by now that I have left out significant parts of the story – but I have done it deliberately so that we can get some idea of the emotional turmoil the disciples are going through. I love the traditional Easter greeting: Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! but I sometimes wonder if we move too quickly from the events of Good Friday and gloss over the experiences of the Jesus' followers on that first Easter Day.

When Jesus suddenly appears standing in the midst of them, they are still puzzling over what it all meant even after the evidence of the empty tomb and the fact that Jesus had appeared to Simon Peter as well as to Cleopas and his companion on the

way to Emmaus. On the one hand they thought it was true but then again it seems to be good to be true, and on the other hand they thought they might be seeing a ghost. As Ian said last week Jesus speaks peace, shalom, into the situation. He quickly dispels that notion that he is a ghost: look, touch, see he says, as he shows them his hands and feet, and then, what seems to really convince them, he eats a piece of broiled fish.

But an important piece of the picture is still missing. We know it's important because this is the part that Luke repeats three times in this chapter and he also includes it in Peter's speech to the crowd in Acts 3. Let's look at those verses.

Luke 24:6-8: - The two men/angels say to the women at the tomb: Why do you look for the living among the dead? ⁶ He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: ⁷ 'The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.' ⁸ Then they remembered his words. (Luke 9:22, 44; 17:25; 18:31-33)

Luke 24:26-27: - Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" ²⁷ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

Luke 24:44-46: - He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."

⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. ⁴⁶ He told them, "This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day."

Acts 3:18: - But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Messiah would suffer.

In each case Jesus, or the angels, or Peter had to explain what was going on because it was not what the disciples had been expecting. When Jesus asks the question: "Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" the way the question is put in the Greek it expects the answer Yes, yes of course it was necessary, but the disciples seem to have an attitude that says: "No, no we didn't think it would have to be like that! In their view, the Messiah should have been leading a victorious uprising against the pagan occupying forces, not dying a shameful and painful death at their hands.

Remember, this is all happening at Passover, and Passover was all about? - The exodus and their escape from slavery in Egypt. Every Passover tensions were high in Jerusalem; there were Roman soldiers everywhere ready put down any sign of trouble, the Jews' status as an occupied country was even more obvious. So, every Passover the Jews were looking for the ultimate exodus, when God would intervene to redeem Israel from captivity, establish his rule worldwide and once more be present with his people. Such high hopes they had; such depths of despair as Jesus, seemingly yet another failed Messiah hung on a cross on the first Good Friday.

What they had expected hadn't happened. And then what did happen was not what they had expected at all. It's quite clear from the way the disciples reacted to Jesus appearing among them that they didn't really have a clue what was going on. So Jesus sits down with them and explains.

There's just a gentle reminder that he had already explained this before and then he opens their minds so that they could understand the Scriptures: the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms all three sections of the Hebrew scriptures. What a wonderful time that must have been – the two Emmaus Road disciples described it as their hearts burning within them.

Two important ideas seem to emerge from what Jesus is saying:

Firstly: the Messiah, Jesus, **had** to suffer and die and then be raised to life on the third day. 'Had' doesn't mean he was forced to, he agonised over it in the Garden of Gethsemane but then chose to do his Father's will. In fact the writer of Hebrews tells us that "For the **joy** that was set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For Jesus it was a joyful fulfilment.

Secondly: all this was a fulfilment of the OT Scriptures.
Let's unpack that a bit.

What did Jesus mean when he said that his suffering, death and resurrection were the fulfilment of Scripture. I don't think he just meant that if there was a prophecy in the OT about him then it had to come true, though that is included, I think it is more like an athlete, or a rugby team, saying we had a game plan, we stuck to it and it paid off, we won, we achieved what we set out to do. In other words, what happened was the fulfilment of the plans God has had for us humans, and indeed all of creation, right from the beginning.

We are not here by chance, God has created us in his image, to be a people belonging to him, to share his life, and to act as his representatives in looking after the world he has made. It's all there in Genesis 1 and 2; the Garden of Eden story gives us an indication of where we fit in the big scheme of things as individuals and as part of humanity as a whole. As creatures made in the image of God we have a dual role to exercise responsible oversight over creation, to cultivate and care for it, and also to 'serve and preserve,' words which in Hebrew are also used to describe the duties of priests serving in the temple. That purpose hasn't changed; we are still called to be in Bible terms a royal priesthood: a worshipping people playing our part in the praise chorus of all creation, and acting as wise and compassionate stewards, vice-regents of the king, whose concern is the flourishing of all creation. That is the goal and we see its outworking beautifully described in Revelation 21 and 22.

But as we know, humanity, Adam and Eve, chose to go their own way not God's and banishment from Eden was the consequence. From here on the Bible storyline shows God working to get things back on track. He chose Abraham to be the one through whom all nations would be blessed; and then gave Israel the responsibility of being bearers of the truth about God to the world. If you know the OT story you will

know that they kept failing as a result of following other gods and eventually they were taken into exile. The rescuers ended up needing to be rescued as well. The last OT book, Malachi, is looking forward to a day when God will finally act and intervene on Israel's behalf. The Bible describes this as the redemption of Israel and in the time of Jesus devout people like Simeon and Anna, or the disciples on the Emmaus road, were longing for it to become a reality.

Some were prepared to fight for it, even if it meant taking on the might of Rome but. Jesus would not only redefine what redeeming Israel would look like but also the way in which it would be achieved, and more specifically what the role of the Messiah would be.

Back in Isaiah, Isaiah 52 and 53 God had introduced his people to the idea of a suffering servant, one who would suffer on behalf of the people. It is highly likely that Jesus drew on this as he explained things to his disciples because the NT writers talk about what was happening on the cross in these terms.

“Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.” 1Cor 15:3.

“In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins.” Eph 1:7

“For he [God] has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” Col 1:14.

And all of this comes out of the love God has for us:

“I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.” Gal. 2:20

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” John 3:16

Forgiveness of sins is key: we are fully forgiven by God our relationship is restored – isn't that something to be joyful about! I grew up as a Methodist singing Charles Wesley's great hymn 'And can it be' We sang it joyfully and lustily- though not always tunefully! And we are called to forgive others in return. Not to forgive can leave us bitter and resentful, bent out of shape and not able to grow into the people God wants us to be.

But there's more! Paul tells us in Colossians that God “having disarmed the powers and authorities he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.” Col 2:15. On the cross Christ took on and defeated our most fearsome enemy: death. The Messiah had to suffer and die in our place because it was the only way that we could be rescued from our enslavement to sin.

Remember that sin is not just breaking the moral code, though it is that, but at its root it is choosing to serve and worship something other than God. We may choose to live to please ourselves or to serve any of the other gods our culture worships: fame, money, sex, power comfort, security but whatever we choose we will, as Paul

warns us, end up being enslaved by it. We will need the forgiveness of sins, and the redemption and rescuing from whatever power is dominating our lives.

If we were to stop here we would might see that Jesus had to die and be raised to life but we need to link that back to the idea of fulfilling God's plan. Just as God told the first humans to spread out and fill the earth so Jesus called on his first disciples to be witnesses to tell others about the forgiveness and freedom that is available in Christ; beginning in Jerusalem, he says. And that is just what we see happening in Acts after the disciples are empowered by the Spirit. At the beginning of Acts 3 we have the story of Peter and John healing of a man lame from birth. If we want to know what the joy of fulfilment looks like we have only to see this guy's response – he goes walking, then leaping and then joy bubbles out of him as he begins praising God; not just because of his physical healing but also because now his disability no longer excludes him from Temple worship. Jesus can bring that sort of healing in areas which touch us most deeply; he can restore the joy of our salvation. Maybe some of us will need to reflect on that later.

Then in our reading from Acts 3:12-19 we see an amazing example of forgiveness of sins. Peter does not mince his words when he tells the crowd that they betrayed Jesus, disowned him and handed him over to be killed: You killed the author of life, he says but God raised him from the dead. So he says – you better watch out! – NO! He then says what we have been saying all along: this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold, that the Messiah would have to suffer.– so, he says, repent and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out. I love the way Spurgeon puts this: A debt, once paid is no longer a debt. True isn't it.

Redemption, rescuing, and setting free is what God has always been about. We are set free to be the people God has created us to be now and on into eternity. We are free to enjoy worshipping God and caring for all his creation, human and non-human. Tom Wright has a lovely way of expressing this. He says we are equipped with the breath of heaven in our renewed lungs to work for God's kingdom on earth.

So, as the ransomed, healed, restored forgiven, redeemed people of God, what are the implications for us as individuals and as a church community as go into our AGM. Christian mission means implementing the victory that Jesus won on the cross in our own live and the lives of others. All our activities: up, in and out, everything flows from this. Let us bear that in mind as we look back on the past year and look forward to all that God is calling us to in the future.

Prayer

Lord, please open our eyes as you opened the eyes of those first disciples that we may see your plans and purposes for us as people who have been ransomed healed restored forgiven through the death of your Son. Help us to be your witnesses not just by what we say but by how we live our lives, empowered and guided by your Holy Spirit to bring freedom, healing and joy into the lives of others. Amen

Reflection Questions

The acronym J O Y is said to refer to the need to put Jesus first, others second, and yourself last if you want to experience joy.

What do you think of that statement?

J – Joy of Jesus who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross.

What do you think this means?

O – Joy of others as we share with them the forgiveness and freedom that is open to all. What are we doing as a church or as individuals to make this happen?

Y – Yourself. Are you living in the truth of these things? What might help you more fully experience the joy we have been talking about?