

Joy from Sorrow

Sermon for the Parish of South Darebin, Easter 6, 5 May 2024

Acts 10:44–48; Psalm 98; 1 John 5:1–12; John 16:16–24

The Reverend Canon Christopher Carolane

Nobody likes receiving bad news, especially when that bad news relates to the impending death of someone who is too young to die. I am sure we have all had such news – some of us regarding people very close to us, but for others the person may have been more distant. No matter what the circumstance, to be told that a young person is close to death, almost always comes as a great shock and with a sense of disbelief.

The Lord Jesus was just 33 years old when he was executed. He was far too young to die. Perhaps it was because of his divinity that Jesus knew that he would be delivered into the hands of evil people and killed. He knew when it was imminent. He knew that this would be the hour in which he would be glorified, yet nevertheless it was a destiny to which he did not look forward. You will recall his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane:

“Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.” Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground.” (Luke 22: 42–44)

Most definitely, Jesus was not looking forward to his crucifixion. Not only would it bring him unthinkable agony, but he also knew it would cause immense emotional pain to all who loved him. Yet despite that, our Gospel reading today tells us that he tried to prepare his disciples for what had to be, by assuring them that their sorrow at his death would turn to joy because, in the words of Jesus recorded by John he said,

‘A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me.’ (John 16: 16)

John tells us that his disciples didn’t have a clue about what he was saying. “What does he mean?” they asked. Just prior to this John tells us that Jesus had told his friends that he was about to go to the one who sent him. They had asked him where that was. Just the thought of Jesus leaving them had filled their hearts with sorrow. Jesus had gone on to tell them that he had to go away so that he could send the Holy Spirit to them who would be the One who would convict the world of sin and lead them into truth.

The disciples still did not understand Jesus. They didn’t want him to go away because they loved him, and they certainly didn’t want him to die.

Understanding their confusion, Jesus said to his friends in verse 20 of today’s Gospel reading:

‘Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy.’ (John 16:20)

To illustrate his point, Jesus used the analogy of a woman in labour about to give birth to her child. The pain of childbirth is great. The pain is not something you would willingly ask for. Yet the mothers of the world throughout time have endured the pain because they know that it will be followed by the joy of welcoming their new-born child into the world. In Jesus' words:

‘... when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world.’ (John 16: 21)

Jesus went on to say that in the same way,

‘... you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.’ (John 16: 21–22)

Just as no one wants to receive bad news or face great trials, pain, or tribulation, so anyone who is in these situations is elated if there is joy to be found by living through the situation and finding a greater outcome as a result.

When pain, tribulation, sorrow and mourning are overcome and the situation is transformed into one of victory, great joy results.

It is when such a transformation occurs, that in the words of today's psalm, we can cry, ‘Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvellous things. His own right hand and his holy arm have won for him the victory.’ (Psalm 98: 1)

The anguish and pain that Jesus knew his disciples would have to live through, he also knew would be turned to indescribable joy when they experienced his resurrection, ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit. Despite his most terrible agony, he would conquer death and so bring eternal life to all whose trust is in him.

But more than that, Jesus assured them that when this occurred, if they asked anything of the Father in his name, the Father would give it to them. (John 16: 23) Such a promise may seem ridiculous if taken at face value. Did Jesus mean that after his resurrection and ascension we could ask anything and it would be given? Could we ask for a million dollars and the Father would give it? Absolutely not. As Colin Kruse says in his commentary of this passage:

This is the last of four places in the farewell discourses [of John's Gospel] where Jesus makes promises to his disciples concerning prayer... In every case but one the answer to the prayer is conditional upon asking ‘in his name’ ... to pray in Jesus' name means to pray for things ‘for his sake’, or in line with his purposes. So, in this verse Jesus is saying that after his resurrection, the disciples will begin approaching the Father directly in their prayers, and whatever they ask the Father, which is in line with Jesus' purposes for humankind and the glory of God, will be given to them.¹

One of the joys that resulted from Jesus' death and resurrection is that the way to God was made open for all believers. As the dramatic ripping of the curtain from top to bottom in the temple at the moment of Jesus' death revealed (Matthew 27: 51), there is no longer a veil between people and God. We can go to God directly in prayer,

¹ Kruse, Colin G, Tyndale Commentary of the Bible, Vol 4: “John”, p 329

knowing that God is listening and that when we pray according to God's will, in the name of Jesus, God will grant our requests.

What joy that brings, to know that we have direct access to the Father in whose kingdom we are now citizens.

"Ahh," I might hear some say, "that's all very well for the pain of Jesus' death and his resulting resurrection. What about my pain? What about the terrible situation in which I find myself today? How is joy to be found through my pain?"

I do not wish to make light of the pain and sorrow that so many people experience today. Sometimes that pain certainly does not bring its own joy. But what I do know is that for every human person there is joy to be found in the presence of God, within God's loving embrace. It is the promise of that joy to come that we know is ours because through his death and resurrection, Jesus opened the wonderful way to eternal life and to the hope of the new heaven and new earth described by John in his Revelation:

'I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away. And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." (Revelation 21: 2-5)

Oh, what JOY that will be.

Amen.