

Be filled with the Joy of the Spirit - Eph. 5: 5-10

Where exactly was today's theme leading us I wondered. And wondered! "Be filled with the Joy of the Spirit." It was hard to find the actual quote in the Bible. There are tons on being filled with *joy*; and even more on being filled with the *Spirit*. But in truth I only found one with the term "filled with the joy of the (Holy) Spirit" before I had to give up. That one most direct quote was in the NLT version of Luke 10:21; the NIV translates even *that* slightly different, "joy through the Holy Spirit", and King James as "rejoiced in spirit" (small "s"). But I knew "joy of the Spirit" was quite a logical phrase, given the way we speak of a relation with God. It can be extrapolated from statements such as Jesus' words in Jn 15:11, "I have told you these things so that you *will be filled with My joy*". Since God is also Christ and also the Holy Spirit, if we become filled with God's joy then we would be *filled with the joy of the Spirit*. But what exactly does it mean to be filled with that joy? Secondly, how can we become so filled? And, thirdly, *what then?* For I don't think there is any question that in Christianity there is *always* that third point "a call to action" to let the Living Water of Christ not only fill us but *overflow to others* in all sorts of ways!

So clearly its meaning would *not* be *limited* to excited, physical manifestations of "joy"; or to speaking in tongues, as St. Paul was always at pains to stress was only *one* possible manifestation of being filled with the *Spirit*. The Book of Acts does not use the term "the joy of the Spirit". But it refers often to people being "filled with the Spirit" for many things in addition to that phenomenon at Pentecost with languages. The list includes preaching, healing, running a food programme, testifying, facing martyrdom, praying, and so on. Therefore let us explore the theme and those three questions more closely.

I recognise enough about "Joy" that since becoming "of mature years" I often consciously wish people a "joyous" Christmas instead of *happy* or *merry*. I understand sufficiently to believe that someone burdened by a painful event may consider that expecting them to be "happy" or, in particular, "merry" at the particular time is thoughtless or frivolous or even hurtful. But I do believe that, if the person is a Christian, they can nevertheless be "joyous" in remembering the Birth of the Saviour even when grieving, and in fact may be more joyful about it at that time, because that is what gives us a special hope even when other paths seem shut. But I also knew that CS Lewis's book, "Surprised by Joy", where I remembered him dramatically describing himself as something like the most reluctant convert in the British Isles, could probably help define "joy" much better than I could. He said he wrote that book to explain his path from atheism to Christianity. In it, he describes "joy" as "an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction." He added, "I call it Joy, which is here a technical term and must be sharply distinguished both from *happiness* and *pleasure*." I doubt whether anyone who has tasted [joy] would ever, if both were in his power, exchange it for *all the pleasures in the world*. But then Joy is never in our power and pleasure often is.

He then goes on to tell of his life from childhood to Oxford professor and multi-disciplined author, and his quest to understand what he called occasional "stabs of Joy", while denying their Source, until the evidence and the calling of God could no longer be denied and he capitulated, first to God and then, resisting once again, full fledged Christianity. On the last page he asks, "But what, in conclusion, of Joy? For that after all is what the story has mainly been about. To tell you the truth, the subject has lost nearly all interest for me *since I became a Christian*. It was valuable only as a pointer to something *other* and *outer*."

He goes on to say that while *the other* was in doubt, while he was lost in the woods so to speak, the pointer, the signpost, was a great matter. I guess we can understand that. That if we are lost our immediate focus is to just find something telling us where we are and how to get to where we want to be. When you get to your destination you don't need the sign posts anymore. You are where you wanted to be. When Lewis became a Christian, he didn't need to search for those elusive stabs of joy, the signposts, so desperately anymore, he had found the *Source* itself.

Lewis realised that joy is never under our power as humans; likewise, our theme uses the passive form, "be filled", recognising it's not up to you to *fill yourself* with the joy, but *allow yourself to be filled*. Indeed, in this they are agreed with the Scriptures in regard to the *Spirit*; it is always "be filled"; we cannot decide how to fill ourselves with the Spirit or the joy thereof. And Lewis stresses that joy must certainly be distinguished from pleasure, which *is* often within our power, unlike joy. Unfortunately, even now we tend not to make that distinction; and indeed we are apt to spend much of our time seeking to fill our lives with what we consider *pleasures*, rather than on the ennobling quest to be filled with *joy*, and specifically the *joy of the Spirit*.

In this regard we find support in the words of our text today from Ephesians 5: 5 to 10, and in the remainder of St. Paul's teachings on both sides of these verses. These are continuations of the moral teachings we started looking at last Sunday. In between he has continued to list individual examples of what we should do and not do, and why. Then, as we resumed the narrative in 5:5 this morning he summarises, "For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God." In other words, we will not be part of God's kingdom as long as we continue to settle for a way of life that involves corruption of the manner of living God had made us for, even the corruption of what he had created as genuine pleasures for us to enjoy as husband and wife who treat each other with love and respect as he refers to a few verses on, or any way of life that uses and abuses and takes advantage of others, with whom we were made to live in community. We will never get to our destination, as Lewis did. We will never get to the Source of that joy, of that feeling that is so overwhelming that we are never satisfied because we always want it. Paul says that is because immoral, impure or greedy persons are idolaters. If they were worshippers and followers of God they could not be any of those things, for those are incompatible with God, and Christ Himself said we cannot serve two Masters.

It is important to note, however, that Paul was not here suggesting that we must bring ourselves to live in these moral ways that he has listed *in order to gain* that inheritance in the ðkingdom of Christ and of God.ö Paul never varied from the teaching of Jesus that the *only way* to be saved, and so become ðchildren of Godö and thus inheritors of and in His kingdom, was to ðrepent and believeö, to *receive* Christ, to believe in Him as the Son of God, that is, God Incarnate, and put our trust in Him.

As Jesus famously stressed about this process of becoming ðchildren of God,ö it meant having to be ðborn againö. And to the perplexed Nicodemus in John 3, Jesus went on to elaborate (and I quote from the NLT), ðI *assure* you no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life. So don't be surprised when I say you *must* be born again. The wind blows wherever it wants. Just as you can hear the wind but can't tell where it comes from or where it is going, so you can't explain how people are born of the Spirit.ö But while Jesus did not try to explain the mystery of *how*, He did tell us the simplicity of what we had to do in order to make it happen ó *believe in Jesus as God's one and only Son* so He can be our Saviour. Paul never wavered from the purity of that message. And here in Ephesians he has actually started out with that right from chapter 1, which includes that great phrase, ðI pray also that *the eyes of your heart* may be enlightened in order that you may know the *hope* to which He has called you, the *riches* of His glorious inheritance in the saints, and His *incomparably great power for us who believe*.ö *Hope, riches, incomparably great power* ó no wonder we are talking about *joy*! And all for those who *believe* ó he didn't say for those who have behaved perfectly in accordance with God's precepts.

In fact, we have to be careful when we read St. Paul, as if we only read some of his writings we might think he completely dismisses the law of God found in the Old Testament, as he is at such pains to stress that it is only through faith in Christ that we are saved. But he is *not* dismissing God's precepts, many of which he has espoused here in chapters 4, 5 and 6 as aspects of the high moral living to which God calls us. The point he always stresses is that we just could not humanly live that sinless life that is required to enter into the presence of our holy God. And it is only by accepting Christ as Lord and Saviour that we *cease being* the impure person that can never inherit the Kingdom of God. In Chapter 2 he had already stressed that ðGod saved you by His grace *when you believed* í Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it.ö But í but, he does not stop there. He immediately adds, ðFor we are God's masterpiece. He has created us *anew* in Christ Jesus, *so we can do the good things* He planned for us long ago.ö

It's not that Paul is asking people who have not been saved to live the pure and moral life *in order* to be saved. But his position is that once we, who were all sinners, are saved when we believe in Christ, then the truth of our belief would be that we have accepted Christ as *Lord*. That means we have let *Christ take charge* of our new lives born of the Holy Spirit, Who has come to dwell in us; and therefore as that new creation, then we will do good things, then we will care for people as Jesus would, then we will stop immoral and impure and greedy behaviour. If we are not endeavouring to do that, it is because we have not allowed Christ to be *Lord* of our life.

Just as Jesus said that it is either one way or the other, we cannot serve two masters, Paul was convinced if we were not following Christ then we were following Satan, who, he says in chapter 2, "is the spirit at work in the hearts of those who refuse to obey God." Recognising the difficulty of the only two alternatives available to us, Paul said in chapter 3 he had prayed for his readers, "so that Christ may dwell in your hearts" [NIV] "as you trust in Him" [NLT]. In this way he said, "your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong." [NLT] That is why Paul was confident we could rise to the challenge of the new and noble life he was describing.

And in verse 6 of our text today, Paul is recognising that there will be people who will try to make us believe that life is not the stark alternatives presented by Paul and by Jesus in John 3:16 and 18: those who believe and are saved, or those who do not and are condemned. In much of St. Paul's ministry he was battling the Gnostics in this regard. They probably don't call themselves Gnostics nowadays, and their arguments are not as crafty as Gnosticism, but we still have no shortage of people who try to lead us astray "with empty words", as we read, or "try to excuse these sins" as the NLT translates it. Who are you going to believe over people with the proven intellect and the profound experiences of a St. Paul or a CS Lewis, and Jesus Himself? Does anyone really think that those people telling us "greed is good" and that there are no absolutes of *truth* or *purity* or *moral direction* love us more than Christ? In looking back at Lewis's book on Joy I was struck by the sagacity in a quote from one of his favourite authors, George McDonald, "The one principle of hell is 'I am my own.'" There is a lot in that little statement. Let us be warned "and flee from it."

So, in closing I come back to where I started my search, the words of Jesus Himself in John 15, "When you obey my commandments, you remain in my love, just as I obey my Father's commandments and remain in His love. I have told you these things, so that *you will be filled with My joy*. Yes your joy will *overflow*. This is My commandment; Love each other in the same way I have loved you." That is how to know *what* the joy of the Spirit is, and *how* to be filled by it. The "what then" question will be answered as that joy overflows from you.

For those of us who have already believed, let us heed that command of Jesus and the words of St. Paul today to therefore "live as children of the Light" in "goodness, righteousness and truth", seeking always to "carefully determine what pleases the Lord" [NLT]. For we know that we definitely experience, and continue experiencing, *real joy* when we do something *good* for others, when we give of ourselves, when we speak the *truth* and live in *integrity* no matter what, when we do what is *right*, not for selfish motives, but simply because, as St. Paul says in Eph. 6:1, "it is the right thing to do" [NLT].

For those who have not yet committed to Christ, I take you back to C S Lewis. He obviously came to agree with Jesus that how people are born again of the Spirit is a mystery. He discovered that, despite his great intellectual resistance to accepting the reality of God and of Christ. I found quite humorous what he wrote after his account of the night he finally "gave in and admitted that God was God and knelt and prayed".

He added, "The Prodigal Son at least walked home on his own feet. But who can duly adore that Love which will open the high gate to a prodigal who is brought in *kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance of escape*?" Quite a mystery alright! And really, it is *equally* a mystery, I think, that so many of us *want to resist* and struggle to *get away* from a God Who *loves us so much* He was ready to *die for us*. And who is seeking and calling us simply because He is a loving parent Who wants only *the very best* for us, wants us to live better in the full potential that He created in us, and to share, here and now and for eternity, in the fullness of life and that great inheritance of His kingdom. If you have been resisting, resist no more. Take a page from CS Lewis, a man of great intellect, and find the Joy that is so satisfying you can't get enough of it. Like him, you do not have to spend your life in some exhausting search, making do every now and then with "fleeting stabs of joy" that are just the signposts pointing you in the right direction, to *the single Source of true joy*, God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit. Amen