

Sunday 24th December 2013

St Barnabas, E17

Christmas Eve – Midnight Mass

We've finally arrived at Christmas, after journeying throughout this Advent with the great themes of faith, hope, courage, peace and, tonight, the theme of joy! The overall message this Advent has been that we wait in faith for the God who comes to us and works from within the brokenness of our world to bring healing and justice. That, I have been saying, is what gives us hope that the world can change. That is what gives us the courage to co-operate with God. That is why we work for peace in expectation of the joy to come. And tonight that joy has arrived, the joy we associate with the birth of the baby Jesus.

So, what is this joy? I am not talking about the cheesy-grin joy that pretends that there is nothing wrong with the world. I am not talking about the short-term joy associated with fulfilling our physical or material needs. I am not talking about the shallow joy of putting on a brave face while hiding our inner brokenness. I am talking about deep joy, the joy of Jesus, the joy that knows that life is hard, the joy that knows that human beings hurt, the joy that, nevertheless, does not

accept suffering as the last word and does not allow suffering to define us as human beings.

Of all the Christmas card, e-mail and FB messages I have received this year, the one that has made we think most is this: 'May the Peace of God DISTURB you this Christmas!' For sure, Christmas is a happy time for many of us, whether Christian or not, a rare opportunity in the year to spend real, quality time with loved ones - a chance to eat, drink, be merry, play games, and show our love and appreciation for one another through the giving and receiving of gifts.

But Christmas also brings into focus many of the things that trouble us in our lives. For many, including me, Christmas is a time which brings the deeper tensions and pain of our lives to the surface. For some it is painful to be apart from family, or to deliberately stay away from them and/or to be remembering loved ones who've passed before us.

Facing this pain is not to be out of the "spirit of Christmas", it is rather to engage with its true meaning, to get with "the reason for the season". Christians believe that in taking human flesh in the birth of Jesus, God embraced all that hurts us in this world. In being born a vulnerable baby to an unmarried teenager, in being born homeless and being

forced into exile as a refugee, God embraced the pain and suffering of human life and sought to transform it from within.

That is the joy of Christmas, that through the life of Jesus, the life of God embracing the suffering of the world, we have a sure hope that suffering is not the end... 'that weeping may endure for a night, but joy come in the morning...'. But it is more that, it is the awareness that we will never see an end to suffering in this world but that as we live between the now of the world as it is and the not yet of the world to come, that even now we need not be defined by suffering, but can choose instead to be defined by joy.

I spent a year of my life living with a community of Franciscan brothers and sisters in Plaistow. Quite often a member of the religious community would use the expression “perfect joy”, often with a cheeky smile when in engaging in a mundane or horrible task, like washing-up or cleaning the loos. I came to learn that this was not just a joke but an attempt to find joy in the difficulties of life, and that it was applied to not just to household chores but to the business of experiencing suffering. This was a house full of people with deep personal hurts: some homeless, some refugees, some struggling with addiction, all of us bearing

inner pain and struggle in our hearts. It was nevertheless a place of much joy, where tears of sorrow could be turned to tears of laughter. Someone (Douglas Steere) once said that, ‘To “Weep for joy” is ever natural because joy lies both between and beyond both tears and laughter.’ I certainly experienced that in that Franciscan house.

I learnt there that joy was not a joke to those brothers and sisters but one of the three notes, one of the three characteristics by which these followers of St Francis attempted to live their lives. In the Principles of the Order, often read during the daily prayers, they would hear these words: ‘Finally, the brothers and sisters, rejoicing in the Lord always (Phil 4.4) must show forth in their lives the grace and beauty of divine joy. They must remember that they follow the Son of Man, who came eating and drinking (Luke 7.34), who loved the birds and the flowers, who blessed little children, who was a friend of tax collectors and sinners (cf Mark 10.16), who sat at the tables alike of the rich and the poor. They will, therefore, put aside all gloom and moroseness, all undue aloofness from the common interests of people and delight in laughter and good fellowship... This joy, likewise, is a divine gift and comes only from union with God in Christ. As such it can abide even in days of darkness and difficulty, giving cheerful courage in the face of

disappointment and an inward serenity and confidence in sickness and suffering. Those who possess it can be content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever they are weak, then they are strong. (2 Cor 12.10)'

This inspiration, to seek to show forth joy, comes from the life of Francis himself and, not least, from his own reaction to the news of what is surely one of the most acute experiences of human suffering, the awareness that he was going to die. When the doctor first examined the 44 year old Francis, he told him that he hoped that, God willing, Francis would soon be well. When Francis insisted on hearing the truth, the doctor told that he had an incurable disease and would be dead within a short period of time, to which Francis responded with the words "Welcome, sister death"! The story is told that Francis uttered these words with great joy, that rather than be defeated by suffering, and by the greatest enemy of human life, death itself, he embraced death as a sister; he transformed the suffering of death by an attitude of deep joy, joy from the faith that suffering is real, that death is real, but that neither is the last word for the follower of Jesus.

Now I am not seeking to offer glib words for those experiencing suffering, and certainly not seeking to offer comforting words to those going through the real agony of facing death, but I am saying that I want to have that faith, the faith of Francis that death is not the end. I do not want my life to be transformed by suffering but choose instead to live in the faith that even the greatest suffering of my life is capable of being transformed by the attitude of joy, the faith that we can know deep joy even in the midst of all that causes us pain and anxiety.

Christmas makes us attentive to the suffering of our lives and our world and this Christmas we cannot but be aware of those who are suffering not only on the streets of Walthamstow, those helped by the Christian Kitchen and living in Forest YMCA, but those suffering in the Philippines, in Syria, in South Sudan and, indeed, in Bethlehem, the birth place of Jesus.

We are right to be disturbed at Christmas by this suffering, but also to witness, through our Christmas celebrations, to a deeper joy, the deep joy that comes through a commitment to alleviate suffering in the faith that suffering is never the last word. Indeed, if we do not witness to this joy, then we hardly offer joy to others. We can hardly claim that the

situations that cause us pain and anxiety in our families, in this neighbourhood, in our world, are capable of transformation, unless we ourselves seek to live lives marked by joy, marked by our attempts to express joy even in the suffering of our lives. In his book ‘Growing in Joy’, Robert Morneau gives a one sentence definition of joy and it is this, ‘The virtue of joy is habitual action that leads to the enlargement of life for oneself and others in that its expansive energies give us zest in living and hope in dying.’

So, I hope the peace of God will disturb us this Christmas, inspire us to live in faith, hope and courage, and lead us into deep joy. As we eat, drink and be merry, may we be attentive to suffering but not defined by it, believing that the Christmas message is indeed joy to the world!

Steven Saxby, December 2013.