

When you don't feel like rejoicing

A sermon on Philippians 4:4-7 by Nathan Nettleton, 15 December 2024

© LaughingBird.net

Message

Celebrating God is not to be a denial of reality, but a faith-filled reaching out for a new reality.

Sermon

A few weeks ago, I spoke in my sermon about how I've been experiencing some depression lately. It is nowhere near as severe or debilitating as what many people deal with, and you don't need to worry about me too much, but it is nevertheless real. And that inevitably affects the way I hear all the calls to joy in tonight's Bible readings. I'm sure I'm not alone there, and in the lead-up to Christmas, the clash becomes more acute for many people.

Our first reading (Zephaniah 3:14-20) opened with a call to "Sing aloud, ... rejoice and exult with all your heart." The canticle we sang in response (Isaiah 12:2-6) spoke of joyfully drawing waters from the well of salvation, and similarly called us to "Shout aloud and sing for joy." And then, most dramatically, in our reading from his letter to the Philippians, the Apostle Paul says, "Rejoice in the Lord always; and again I say, Rejoice," or as the version we heard said, "Celebrate the Lord non-stop. I repeat – celebrate!"

The Apostle's call to "rejoice in the Lord always" is a big favourite in some churches. In some churches, and I know that some of you have come from such churches, there is a lot of importance attached to people being hyped up and enthusiastic every time they came to a church service. I've even heard people being reprimanded by the leaders if they don't seem sufficiently revved up and excited about things.

A friend of mine used to share a house with another guy who was a regular worship leader in the church they'd been in. He reckoned the guy seemed to be able to lead the singing at church with a beaming smile plastered on his face, but be a totally different person when he came home. He reckoned it all seemed rather forced and artificial.

Surely faking it is not what the Apostle Paul was calling for? But what does he mean? How can we possibly rejoice and celebrate all the time without being fake? Nobody feels good all the time. We all have days or weeks when we just feel like garbage, when our whole world looks black and when we'd have more chance of teaching a dog to recite poetry than we would of feeling joyous and celebratory.

So what are we to make of Paul's call on days like that? Are we being disobedient and sinful if we don't manage to plaster on a smile and sing and dance with the hyped up crowd?

It's not too hard to think of ways of justifying the practice of those churches. For starters, you could note that Paul is telling us to do something, not to feel something. He doesn't say, "Feel joyous", he says, "Rejoice! Celebrate!" It is something that you do, and it is not necessarily dependent on how you feel.

At this time of year especially, we can probably relate to that. All over the city people are holding Christmas parties or getting ready for Christmas Day gatherings, and the expectation of behaving happily and joyously regardless of how you actually feel is part of the unwritten

law of the season. People grit their teeth and plaster on smiles to gather with people they can't stand and pretend that everything is harmonious and happy.

I've heard people talk about putting off telling people about some major bad news so as not to let it overshadow anyone's Christmas celebrations. In fact I've done it myself in a big way. Way back when I was twenty four, I went through Christmas pretending everything was normal and happy – I went to church and celebrated the birth of Christ; I went to Christmas dinner, both lunchtime and evening with two different extended families and celebrated the “family Christmas spirit,” playing the happy couple with my then wife, knowing all the time that on Boxing day she was moving out and our marriage was over.

Maybe you've never faked it on quite that scale, but we've all had special occasions – perhaps someone's wedding or birthday – for which we've put on a happy face and celebrated despite what was actually going on inside us at the time. Sometimes it would be selfish to do otherwise.

And because we've all done it, and because we generally accept that for the sake of others there are times when it is the right thing to do, you can see how people could argue that we should do it whenever we gather to worship. You could argue that since every Sunday is a little Easter, a celebration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, that it is appropriate to put on our happy faces and celebrate no matter how we feel.

But there is a problem with that line of reasoning, isn't there? You see, the reason we accept that we should do it at someone's wedding is because it is someone else's big day and it is not appropriate to be out of step and draw the attention from them onto yourself. We are doing it out of love and respect for someone.

But whose benefit are we doing it for if we do it every time we come to worship? Whose big day is it? God's? Well, how would we be doing God any favours by putting on the happy act? We honour God by offering ourselves to God – our real selves, not some censored public facade. We can't fool God anyway, so God is hardly likely to find our worship any more acceptable because of our pretence.

So if there's no point in doing it for God's benefit, who else could we be doing it for? Well, in some churches, the usual answer is that you are to do it for the benefit of visitors, so that they might see how wonderful life is with Jesus and be converted. Well that sounds to me like false marketing. If people are being attracted by what we pretend to be rather than what we really are, we're doing no one any favours.

Well, it's one thing to be able to dismiss that line of thinking, but we've still got to answer the question about what on earth Paul meant. What does it mean to celebrate always, even when you feel horrible?

I can't claim to speak definitively for Paul, but this is how I think it relates to us.

First of all, the statement is addressed to a church, rather than to individuals. It is quite a different thing to say that it is expected of a church that they celebrate or rejoice always than it is to say it of an individual. When you say it to a church it is not a lot different from saying that it is to worship always. It is describing something about the nature of the worship that

we, as a church, are to be always offering to God. Our worship is to be celebratory, to be joyous. We are celebrating who God is and what God does. We are celebrating the love that we have encountered in Jesus Christ and rejoicing over what that has meant for us.

All of us are to contribute to that celebration, but I don't think that that means that all of us individually are to plaster on a happy face and pretend that we always feel joyous. Celebrating God is never to be a denial of the reality we live in. We acknowledge this in our worship most weeks in one of the early prayers. It is missing during Advent, but usually we say:

We come defeated, we come dancing,
We come traumatised, we come trusting,
We come aggrieved, we come adoring;
Send your Holy Spirit to call us by name and lead us home.

We are acknowledging up front that the group of us gathering here to worship do not all come with the same sets of feelings and attitudes. We have a whole spectrum of different experiences shaping each of us as we arrive here to worship. And to some extent that rightly shapes the mood of our worship.

But there is also a dimension of our celebration that is always beyond the sum total of our moods and attitudes. There is both a practical local reason for this and a cosmic reason. In our local practice, we here have chosen to worship using prepared patterns and prayers, and one of the advantages of this is that it frees us from the burden of trying to generate a celebratory offering to God when we may not be feeling up to it. Rather than having to generate it spontaneously, we just kind of join in to it and our celebration of God can accommodate all our varying mind sets and yet transcend them all.

When you look at this from the big picture side, you see the cosmic dimension. The worship of the Church is not just what we do when we gather here in the Cyber Chapel. The Church is much bigger than just our congregation, and the Church's celebration of God is something that is going on all the time. The Church is rejoicing in God always. On earth and in heaven the body of Christ is offering praise to God. What we do here each time we gather is simply join our voices with that. We don't ever really begin the worship, we just join in, and what we are joining into is a never ending cosmic celebration of God.

So then, when we gather to worship, with our mixed bag of feelings, and join in with the cosmic celebration of God, it is not a denial of the reality of our lives, even if we are feeling angry at God. We are not called to fake it, but we are also not called to pretend that worship begins and ends with me and how I feel today.

Rather than deny reality, we are called to worship from within our reality, and in worship to reach out in faith for a new reality. This stretching for the new is particularly in focus at this time of year. Advent is about leaning into a reality that is not yet quite within reach.

So to celebrate worship in a spirit of anticipation is a declaration that although we may not be experiencing the fullness of life that God has promised in the present reality of our lives, we nevertheless are putting our trust in God and celebrating our faith that God and God's promised new reality are bigger and more sure than our present reality.

We are celebrating the God who has entered into the despair and horror that this world can inflict on us, but who has risen to new and limitless life.

We are celebrating our hope that whatever is going on for us now, our share of resurrection life is assured.

We are celebrating the God who comes to us in the fragile promise of a baby yet unborn, and we are celebrating our hope that no matter how lost and frightened and unwanted we may feel, God is always being born again in our midst and, with God, a whole new reality is born in which there will no longer be any conflicting realities stifling our desire to surrender to the beauty of worship and to the peace of God which passes all understanding.