

Freshers' Evensong 2012, 7 October, Jesus College Oxford

Joys in Jesus

Proverbs 8.22-31

Gal. 5.22b-26

In nomine...

Welcome to Jesus. Yet again. Welcome to your Common Rooms, welcome to your Hall, welcome to your Bar, welcome to your library, welcome to your IT room... welcome to our community. You've now achieved your academic places, you've now been admitted, you're here. As the old hymn has it, now you've come of age, welcome to the House of Fun.

Jesus College – a House of Fun. Well, yes. The fun that comes through hard work and success. The fun that comes through friends. The fun that comes through bops and foam and paint, I'm told. The fun that comes through being in a lively and vibrant city. The fun? of rowing at dawn. The fun of learning something every day – whether that's organic chemistry or the meaning of 'oppa gangnam style'? No, I won't demonstrate. The fun of colleagues, humour, music, dance, art, sport, discovery. Such fun!

Welcome to this House of Fun which is Jesus College. And indeed its chapel. For in this holy place we are not just a sedate, thoughtful, pious bunch – but we are a crowd of real people, with sorrows and joys, pains and pleasures, tears and laughter. I've been taking many joyful weddings right here over the summer; equally, members of our college come here not just for thanksgiving and celebration, but also as a place of refuge, calm amidst the storm.

In short, this evening, welcome to *your* Chapel. A place for everyone. A place of glorious music, beautiful surroundings, a place for quiet, meditation, prayer and praise. A place to come when you are stressed, a place to come when you are relieved or thankful. A place to come and gather your wits, or perhaps just to feel that you can safely let go of them for a few moments. A place to breathe, to rest.

Welcome to this house of God, a house of prayer, a house of peace; and (to some extent) a house of Fun. For this term we're thinking about Joys and Delights. So there will be plenty of chance for fun and laughter, but equally plenty of chance for deeper, more enduring reflection.

For if there are three features I would hope to offer in a sermon, they would be Relevance, Engagement, and Depth. And for those of you students who will be preaching at our Thursday evening services throughout term, I've even given them a colour to help you remember – think: Relevance, Engagement, Depth. Relevance – because I can assure you that what is truly of God is shown by the fact that it *connects* with your life, and the life of the world around you; Engagement – because what is truly of God is recognised as something attractive, something that draws you towards it, even if it is challenging; and Depth – because what is truly of God is known by what

resonates deep within you, what gives us a sense of meaning, a sense of perspective, a sense of goodness – and indeed Joy.

So what is Joy? Well, let me use a well-worn theological road known as the *via negativa* (those of you who have not heard me preach before should be warned that I love ancient languages...) or the way to learning what something is by reflecting first on what it is *not*. So what is true Joy 'not'?

How does Joy differ from Pleasure? I suggest that Pleasure may be fleeting or instant, Joy will be lasting. Pleasure may be simply a surface thing – chocolate, a warm bath, a delicious perfume, gorgeous music, a fun activity. But Joy – which may well be experienced at the same time as Pleasure – will nevertheless go deeper, be more lasting, more rooted in who you are and what you are.

How does Joy differ from Happiness? I suggest that Happiness may be a state of mind, while Joy is a state of being. So I can know that I'm happy when I'm having a good day; while I can know deep joy even when I'm not having a good day. Joy does *not* depend on Happiness... it can be known even if we're really down, struggling to endure. Read Paul's Epistles in the NT and you'll see what I mean.

Happiness is rooted in what is around us; Joy is grounded in what is within us. So Happiness is affected by what's *happening* to us; Joy may be fed by such outside influences, and yet does not *rely* on them.

And what *is* Joy? What do our readings tell us today about Joy? Proverbs: Joy is beyond time, beyond place. It is infused throughout all creation, inspired by creation. In Proverbs, Joy is the response of Wisdom to all creation. In this wonderful account of Wisdom personified in Proverbs 8, Wisdom is full of delight, of joy. Wisdom is even depicted playfully.

Wisdom and Joy go hand in hand. Wisdom is always in the presence of the Creator - however you understand that, whether as a personal Creator or a Creative Force; and so Joy is also something that is poured out in all that is creative and constructive and builds up. Joy is something that Wisdom knows, and that God knows. The Creator rejoices, delights in the whole world, even in all the human race. That, certainly to me, is mind-boggling, something to go away and think on. God takes joy in you, in me, in all of us.

Who do you know who takes joy in you? Perhaps it is your dad or your mum, some particular close friends or your partner. Perhaps – if your studies go really well – your teachers will take joy in you, in teaching you, in watching you grow. Perhaps you will become aware that despite my clowning around as I try to learn all your names, I take joy in all of you lot – unbelievable, I know – whether we have lots or little in common. But I imagine when you ask yourself the question, “Who takes joy in me?” you'll only think of those who are nearest and dearest. And you may perhaps think that even some of those nearest and dearest only truly take joy in you when you do what they want, when you make them 'happy', when you give them pleasure.

But you can relax. Because even when you're not on top form, even when you don't think that you can really be giving much joy to those around you – and let's face it, we all know those times, and good as Jesus College is, there'll probably be some times while you're here when you're not feeling great, whether it's Freshers' flu, lack of confidence, or just a bad day or week – it's normal – But even then, you can know that those times when you don't think anyone really would take joy in you, there is always God who rejoices in you.

So can you conceive of God taking Joy in you? Can you spend a moment thinking what it is like to have someone rejoicing in you, delighting in you, whether you're fresh from the boathouse or gym, whether you're covered in foam? or whether your make-up is smudged? Can you imagine how amazing it is to have someone rejoicing in you, delighting in you, whether you're being hyper or whether you're sitting by yourself and feeling full of shyness? And can that in turn be a source of joy to you – a joy, a stability, that goes beyond the surface, beyond our everyday surroundings, to touch what is deep within us, to engage with what makes us who we are even if we don't yet know quite precisely who we are...

The Divine Joy in Creation – the divine creative force that rejoices in you, however you are, whoever you are – is in turn the true source of your joy. Our second reading, from Galatians, speaks of Joy being the 'fruit of the Spirit'. By that Paul means a spiritual gift, a God-given grace that is the gift of the Holy Spirit. We cannot obtain such gifts by human effort; but we can be open to receiving them by recognising our own depths and allowing them to be filled with the Divine.

True joy – as opposed to pleasure or happiness – changes lives. Not only does Joy change the life of the joyful; but the joyful one can bring that deep joy to those around them. Deep joy changes and enhances communities – it is still there even in times of darkness, difficulty and disappointment; it offers inward serenity and confidence even in the face of sickness and suffering, weakness, insults, and hardship.

Welcome then to this House of Joy. There is much Joy to be found here in Jesus: after all, our college bears the name of the One who is sometimes understood as that Joyful Wisdom who delights in Creation in Proverbs 8. Make the most of our happy moments this term – the juggler who will come to Chapel, and the founder of the Communards (does that date me?). I challenge you to find joy in one another, even when your neighbour's annoying you, even when your peers are acting less than delightfully (perish the thought...) I challenge you to find things to appreciate in one another, things to thank each other for, reasons to rejoice in one another.

And may we *all* find, here in Jesus, true, deep, lasting, and nourishing joy, joy that not only brings delight to you but also overflows to all those around you. We have many things in common here, and not least that we each play our own tiny parts in a whole creation which is a source of joy to God, and who in turn can be a source of joy to us. Bear in mind that those around you are equally rejoiced in as you are rejoiced in. I have a vision of a community here overflowing with the joy – and that's a vision to which we can together work in fellowship and in community. If I had a glass in hand I would raise it and declare: To Joy in Jesus.