

Jesus College Chapel: Candlemas 2023 Homily  
*Anxiety and Joy*

*Haggai 2:1-9; John 2:18-22*

In the name of the Father . . .

I have a curious and ambivalent relationship with Joy. Or at least Joy as popularly conceived – as a pleasurable sensation, a good vibe.

Perhaps I can demonstrate this difficulty with a couple of brief episodes.

The first is a felt banner which stands at the font, at the West End of my church in Birmingham. It's slightly tacky and not entirely in keeping with the Gothic grandeur of that space.

It displays a series of brightly coloured candles with the word JOY emblazoned on it in red. Occasionally I internally shudder at it, and wonder what it communicates to visitors. What do they think it means? Does it make Christians seem strange?

The second is a little story about me and your chaplain. When we were at theological college in this city, we had a tutor who used to encourage us to be more joyful. Sometimes that tutor would berate us a little for our reserved, austere and solemn approach to the Christian faith . . . Though I'm certain that both of us have relaxed a bit since then!

Sometimes I've had to explain to North American interlocutors, that for the residents of these Atlantic Isles, joy as a response to a is more likely to be expressed under a veil. That veil is usually one of reverence (like the joy we might express in tonight's ceremonies) or else under sarcasm.

Perhaps culturally we skirt around the direct expression of delight, because we don't wish to intrude upon the good things we encounter – better to admire them from the distance, being quietly satisfied that they exist.

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But my issues with joy run a bit deeper than this, I have to admit. First-hand experience, both pastorally and personally, of life's harder episodes has cautioned me against an easy satisfaction with things as they are.

That's why I chose to speak about anxiety and joy tonight, because I feel it's a nettle people of faith don't often grasp. How can we speak of Joy in a world of pain? Even more, what does a divine Joy, a delight from God and in God, look like in the real world? The world that, for some of us, can be a profound struggle both outwardly – socially, economically – and in our inner lives.

Without constructing a straw person and setting fire to her, I want to say that there is a kind of hollow joyfulness that Christians sometimes imagine they need to have. Some of that is being "joyful in the Lord" – the counsel to always give thanks, and never to rage or protest against one's lot in life, injustice, or at God.

And this often blends with a kind of secular self-help philosophy, which teaches us that we are in charge of our own happiness. I think of those Twitter threads doing the rounds that say "Twenty ways to be successful in your 30s" and it always seems to begin with lifting weights.

Joy can be theologically problematic when it's presented as a work, something that we do or muster ourselves, a calling up on our inner resources; or worse, as an obligation be content when really we're suffering mistreatment, abuse or loneliness.

And what we know about anxiety and depression is another piece of this puzzle. We human beings are body and soul, matter and spirit. Experiences like anxiety are not somewhere in the mind, but also habitual physiological responses to our environment.

Our nervous systems can be trained by the conditions of our lives, past and present, to respond to life with diminished pleasure, energy or drive. All the things that people associate with Joy – a feeling of bliss, a sense of completion, seem to be elusive.

The fact is that such feelings are harder to attain for those whose make-up and personality, early life experiences or economic circumstances create conditions where they are on high alert.

So often, modern consumer society – dare I say capitalism? – is inimical to conventional joys. It robs us of our time, diminishes our selfhood, directs our desires towards objects other than the good we seek. No human body or soul, not that of the highest academic achievers, nor even Christian priests, is immune to the effects of this societal anxiety.

Well, I've necessarily created a bleak picture for which I apologise. But I wanted to get to grips with reality as many of us experience it. Some popular faith-discourse tells us that we ought to feel joyful because of what God has done for us in Christ, and secular wisdom tells us to seek our own pleasures in a world of anxiety.

But I don't think either of these things is capital-J Joy, the Joy of the divine, eternal joy. Such a Joy would meet us in the depth of who we are, and in the material circumstances of injustice, mental illness and suffering – as well as all that's good about human life.

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Here we can to the Scriptures and the spiritual tradition of the church for guidance.

Tonight's readings are deeply material and powerfully honest about the destruction human lives, human societies, human bodies have to contend with. This is expressed in terms of the destruction and reconstruction of the Temple, that great theme of Candlemas. What it will mean to be rebuilt and renewed when life has brought us low?

In the prophet Haggai, we see some of the older citizens of Jerusalem doubt that the Temple can ever be rebuilt. They imagine the glory of the former Temple, and are sceptical that it could ever be so beautiful again.

Perhaps we can see in this an echo of our own crises. We can be haunted by the idea that our greatest moment is past, that nothing will ever be as glorious again. Nor is this confined to the old – I speak to students and graduates who express a similar sentiment: I will never regain what I once had. Anxiety and depression can present such thoughts to our minds: my house is devastated, my inner life is ruins. I will never again be the person I once was.

And to their doubt the prophet comes in and says: yes, truly you never really knew the old Temple. You never knew what things were like before. *But thus says the Lord: I will shake the heavens and the earth; the latter splendour of this house shall be greater than the former.*

God says, you will be more glorious than you can ever imagine. Your person, body and soul, will be renewed and transformed from within. So much so, that what you were before will fade in comparison. This is a message of hope to the sufferer. Not that you or I, by our own will or resources, can make ourselves happy or fulfilled, but God's mysterious promise that we will flourish. And what God asks for that to come to pass is trust.

When we turn to the Gospel of John, we see this promise fleshed out in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus' body, his human body like ours with its blood vessels, neural pathways, organs and its thoughts, feelings and anxieties – this body is the Temple which is going to be rebuilt.

God's act of powerful renewal is going to take place in Jesus. Jesus the man of sorrows who agonised in Gethsemane and cried dereliction on the cross. The sufferer of the world's oppression and distortion *par excellence*. The One who suffers with all in physical or mental pain. This One God will raise up. He will fill again his mortal body with divine life. Not as a one-off event but as a means for all people to be made new.

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In these passages do we see a glimpse of what Joy might be in a world where bodies and souls are pained, by sufferings which are interconnected states of body and mind?

Not Joy as mere pleasure or satisfaction, which comes and goes, but Joy as desire for Resurrection? Joy as the result of God's mighty act of Love, in history, in the incarnation, in real human lives.

This Joy breaks the paradigm of previous experiences. Haggai's conversation-partners cannot imagine how glorious the new Temple will be, Jesus' contemporaries only understand once he has risen from the dead.

There is something elusive but genuine about such Joy. It's a form of *Sehnsucht*, a desire for something we cannot quite see, but is nevertheless kindled deep within us, if only as the smallest spark. The now less-fashionable but still eminently quotable C.S. Lewis captures it when he writes:

*All Joy reminds. It is never a possession, always a desire for something longer ago or further away or still 'about to be' . . . The very nature of Joy makes nonsense of our common distinction between having and wanting.*

Now Joy of this kind, even someone as reserved, as anxious, as melancholy as I can be, could comprehend and possess!

This Joy is an open possibility for all, because it runs deeper than the fluctuations of our physiology, our brain states, our cultural baggage. It has an elusive character which is precisely what marks it out as authentic and real. It is more like dissatisfaction than easy-going pleasure, more like yearning than fulfilment. It is categorically not a denial of suffering but the momentum to grow and learn *within it*.

So often, this Joy comes to us as a gift, from a horizon beyond us that we can't identify: a new love, inspiration for art, music or writing, the beauty of a moment that speaks to us of something beyond.

Christians would dare to say that this kind of Joy has the Resurrection as its source, which is the definitive, cosmos-transforming act of divine love which will eventually remake all things.

The Rule of the Third Order, SSF to which I belong says:

*This Joy is a divine gift, coming from union with God in Christ. We carry within us an inner peace and happiness, which others may perceive, even if they [or I might add, we ourselves] do not know its source. Those who possess it can rejoice in weakness, insults, hardships and persecutions for Christ's sake . . . It is a God-given grace, never obtainable by human effort.*

What good news this is. A non-productive Joy, that may be discovered in spite of our problems and anxieties, a desire and opening into something greater than ourselves, our life, our home, the new Temple, the heavenly Jerusalem, the Kingdom to come.

Lord, grant us to search, seek and trust in this Joy all the days of our life. Amen.

