

CHOOSE TO REJOICE!

Third Sunday of Advent
16th December 2018
West Epping Uniting Church
Philippians 4: 1-13

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Many of you may remember the case of Lindy Chamberlain. A mother was convicted for the murder of her 9-week-old baby, Azaria, back in 1982. Lindy claimed the baby had been taken by a dingo while camping near Uluru. The body of the child was never found. Then some years later Azaria's missing jacket was discovered in an area full of dingo lairs. The Chief Minister of the Northern Territory ordered Lindy's immediate release and the case was reopened. In 1988 the Northern Territory Court of Criminal Appeals unanimously overturned all convictions against Lindy and her husband, Michael, who had been convicted as an accessory after the fact.

What must it be like to be convicted and sentenced to gaol for a crime you have not committed? I can't begin to image.

Australian journalist, Peter Greste, was arrested in Cairo, Egypt in 2013, with other colleagues accused of "damaging national security". Peter was placed in solitary confinement for a month before actual charges were laid. He spent a total of 400 days in prison before being released and deported home. Peter's "crime" was that he reported on the political situation in Egypt at the time. In effect Peter Greste's only "crime" was that he was reporting the truth.

It's tough when one gets arrested and put in prison for doing one's job. Moreover, it's a scandal to be punished for simply bearing witness to what is true. This is effectively what happened to St Paul. During his ministry Paul was imprisoned many times. Over his lifetime Paul effectively spent, in total, nearly six years in gaol. His so-called "crime" was to minister to the Gentiles or non-Jews, it was to heal the vulnerable and weak and it was to proclaim Jesus as the Son God. Both Jews and Romans alike were outraged with this claim.

Acknowledging Jesus as the Son of God was blasphemy to the Jews. It was sedition to the Romans. But as we affirm today, Paul was not doing anything wrong. He was simply proclaiming what we believe to be the truth.

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Paul's last incarceration probably took place in Rome. Here he faced the emperor's court and was subsequently beheaded in the year 68.

Now, with all this in mind, one would expect Paul to be a pretty miserable fellow. After all, being in a Roman prison was certainly no picnic. But today we read from his letter to the Philippians. And what does Paul speak about? It's not about his sufferings or his woes.

Rather, Paul talks about joy and rejoicing! Listen again to what Paul says:

"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice" (Philippians 4:5).



Paul was writing this letter from a prison cell, possibly in the port city of Caesarea in the north of Israel. This was a major Roman fortress inhabited by Roman Governors including Pontius Pilate. And as we read through the text we witness an overwhelming sense of jubilation and glee as Paul exhorts the young church in Philippi not to worry about things – but, rather, to constantly give thanks to God!

Now, we should be careful here. Paul is not calling his people to deny reality around them and to simply pretend everything is okay when it's not. Paul is not advocating some kind of cheap, superficial happiness where one walks around the place gritting one's teeth with a cheesy smile while deep-down one is hurting or is being torn apart.

Paul's reference to joy and to rejoicing is, I believe, like what the great theologian, Karl Barth, once said. Barth says this joy is a *"continual, defiant, nevertheless"*. Think about it. Joy is a *"continual, defiant, nevertheless"*.

The kind of joy Paul refers to does not have its basis in our particular circumstances of life. Rather, Paul's joy is related to the truth that, despite what may be happening to us, despite the things happening around us, God is near. God is very near.

Friends, Paul's joy is rooted in the unfathomable truth that God comes to us in Jesus Christ. God comes to restore us. Paul's rejoicing is embedded in the declaration that God is born among us in Jesus Christ. Here God comes to reconcile and save us.

So, Paul's joy is outward looking. Paul's joy is focussed on God and what God is doing rather than on any particular circumstance of the day that impinges on his life.

One commentator describes this in terms of *"taking heart"* or *"having courage"*.

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To be happy is when circumstances allow it. For instance, we may be happy when we receive pay a rise, a promotion, a greeting from a long lost friend or a good report from our medical practitioner.

But to rejoice is to look beyond the certain circumstances of life and to gaze with determination, with faith and with trust to the God who is so near.

I sometimes think Paul is the ultimate “half-glass full” guy. You know what I mean. In the circumstances of life we can look to what’s there or we can look to what’s missing. I always try to be a “half-glass full” person.

Presently, my wife and I are in the process of selling and then buying a house. Our house in Port Macquarie was sold for less than we anticipated. That’s a “half-glass empty” reality. Yet while we did not receive what we wanted, we received what we needed.

That’s a “half-glass full” approach.

Likewise, we are moving into the process of purchasing a house in the upper Blue Mountains. The house is not exactly what we want but it meets our need and it ticks all the important boxes.

A “half-glass full” view is actually a good one to carry through life. But, you see, Paul is saying a lot more here. Paul says our joy does not have to be dependent purely of what’s going on our lives or how we see life. True joy doesn’t emanate from just taking a “half-glass full” approach.

Real joy is bound up in the wonderful truth that God is near. God is there no matter what.



Friends, this kind of joy affirms that God is for us - despite the trials and the tribulations that are forced upon us. Real joy proclaims that despite whatever we face or experience, God comes to us in love, to heal and restore us - particularly at Christmas time.

So, even if we feel hedged in by the busyness of life. Even if we are burdened with creeping secularism and the commercialisation of Christmas, even if this time of the year sparks sad memories, fears of family conflict or concerns about the immediate future, there is much to be joyful about. For God comes to us in the Jesus. God is born among us in the Christ child to heal, restore and to save us.

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And you know, Paul takes this to another dimension. In the letter to the Philippians, Paul refers, not so much to Christmas, but to a future event when Christ will be fully revealed to us, to a time when we will see Jesus face-to-face. Now, that's something to be really joyous about!

Friends, as Paul suffered in prison, he could have become bitter, angry and despairing. But Paul embraces a *"continual, defiant, nevertheless"* approach. Paul *"takes heart"* and *"has courage"*. Paul presses on.

Towards the end of his letter to the Philippians Paul exclaims: *"I can do all things through him who strengthens me"*.

Friends, here is a person who chooses to rejoice. Here is a person who chooses not to be dragged down by the circumstances of life. Here is a person who simply delights in the truth that God is with us!

Paul didn't have much control over his life. Indeed, Paul was vulnerable to those around him. Paul became a victim to those who were suspicious and fearful of him. Ultimately, they got his head.

But Paul was executed - a joyful person. Paul met his death - defiant of the forces of evil. Paul's life was cut short - with courage and in trust of the God who is always there for him.

As Christmas approaches what do you think? Is there real joy in your hearts as we near that day when the birth of Jesus is celebrated? Are you prepared to look beyond your circumstances of life to the God who is there and is coming to us?

Brothers and sisters in Christ, let go the circumstances of life that concern or haunt you - and rejoice. Rejoice in the God who loves you. Rejoice in the God who yearns to be in fellowship with you. Rejoice in the God who comes to heal you, to restore and to save you.

Let go you of your cares and woes and rejoice. Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice!

Amen.

