

## Homily for the Twenty First Sunday of Ordinary Time Year C (22/08/10)

In the opening prayer of today's mass we prayed that God would 'help us to seek the values that will bring us lasting joy in this changing world'. Lasting joy, there is something we might all be keen to have. As the prayer implies, so much is changing, so much seems to pass, so much seems to be built on sand; it is able to satisfy us for a while, but then it leaves us feeling empty and needy. How can we find joy that lasts?

You would probably not believe it if you swallowed the caricature of Pope Benedict that you so often see in the media, but the truth is that if you read what he actually says, joy is absolutely fundamental to his thinking. The possibility of joy that lasts, joy that overcomes troubles, sadness and temptation is what excites him because that is the heart of the Christian message. In the United States he challenged the Church to communicate two very specific things: 'the joy born of faith and the experience of God's love'<sup>1</sup>. In fact, as will become apparent in a few moments, they are not two separate things at all, but one single idea.

Where does the Christian promise of joy begin? For Pope Benedict it begins right at the beginning:

*'The history of Christianity begins with the word Rejoice! According to Luke, it is the first word spoken by the angel who announced to Mary the birth of Jesus.'*<sup>2</sup>

The angel's greeting represents, for Pope Benedict, a one word summary of what it means to be Christian. The very nature of Christianity is contained in that word, it is above all about rejoicing. When the angel brings the news of Jesus' birth to the shepherds, he makes this even more clear:

*'Do not be afraid. Look, I bring you news of great joy, a joy to be shared' (Lk 2.10)*

Already the rejoicing of Mary has spread beyond the Holy Family, out into the fields, and soon it will spread further, because it is a joy to be shared.

How can we find this joy, what is the key that will unlock it, what will make this real, concrete for me, how can it actually make my life better? The answer to this is really rather beautiful. 'The root of man's joy is the harmony he enjoys with himself'<sup>3</sup>. In an essay on joy that he wrote more than 30 years ago Pope Benedict makes it quite clear that the key to becoming a person of joy is to accept myself; I must be able to say "actually, I am ok; of course, there are some things about me that could be a great deal better, some things I'd like to change, some rough corners to knock off, but fundamentally I'm ok". This shows how wrong it would

---

<sup>1</sup> St Patrick's Cathedral, New York 19/04/08

<sup>2</sup> 'Faith as Trust and Joy – Evangelium' Ratzinger, J in Principles of Catholic Theology Ignatius Press 1987, reprinting an article originally published in 1977

<sup>3</sup> ibid. All unattributed quotations in single 'quotation marks' are from this essay.

be to see the Pope as some sort of dry and stern disciplinarian constantly demanding that we be ashamed of ourselves. He says that egoism, self-centredness, must be overcome, yes; but we mustn't confuse that with self-acceptance, because that is something we need to discover and to embrace.

Joy is founded on accepting myself, on seeing and feeling that actually I am ok. But this is not something that we can manufacture, create for ourselves. 'We can love ourselves only if we have first been loved by someone else.' If I am going to accept myself, I cannot do it all alone.

*'If an individual is to accept himself, someone must say to him "It is good that you exist" – must say it, not with words, but with that act of the entire being that we call love.'*

Joy depends on self-acceptance, and self-acceptance depends on someone saying to me – more than saying to me, making real by their actions, 'It is good that you exist'.

It is because I am loved that I can know joy. But that is not the end. If that was all there is to it, I could find such advice in any agony column. Love alone is not enough. This person tells me that they love me; they even show me that they love me – but how can I be sure, how can I know they are telling the truth. So much anguish and despair spread from this doubt: how can I know they mean it? Am I sure that it is good that I exist? Love is not enough without truth: 'the truth will set you free'<sup>4</sup>.

Joy depends on self-acceptance, and self-acceptance depends on someone saying to me 'It is good that you exist'; but there must be some way of knowing that they mean it, knowing it is true. There is. God says to us that he loves us; he says to each of us that it is good that we exist. When we turn to him with doubt in our voices and ask "can we be sure you mean it" his answer is quite simple. He points to his Son on the cross. Jesus says to us, it is good that you exist, and to prove to you that I mean it I will even die for you. I would rather die than have you doubt for a moment that what I say is the truth when I tell you that I love you.

*'One who is so loved that the other identifies his life with this love and no longer desires to live if he is deprived of it: one who is loved even unto death – such a one knows that he is truly loved. But if God so loves us, then we are loved in truth. Then love is truth, and truth is love. Then life is worth living. This is the evangelium [good news]'*

From the very moment that Jesus left behind the safety and the glory of heaven to live and die among us, from the first word of the angel to Mary, the possibility of joy, of self-acceptance that is based on the knowledge that I am absolutely and definitively loved has broken into the world.

---

<sup>4</sup> John 8.32

Although the article originally written by the Pope is more than 30 years old, the same idea keeps coming back again and again in his letters and his homilies<sup>5</sup>. When he tries to explain what eternal life may be like he writes that it 'would be like plunging into the ocean of infinite love' and in that 'we are simply overwhelmed with joy'<sup>6</sup>. When he visited Malta earlier this year he spoke to the priests at one of the masses and summed up their role in this way: 'The mission entrusted to priests is truly a service to joy, to God's joy which longs to break into the world'<sup>7</sup>. The longer I am a priest, the more sure I am that this is right. So much of my time is spent saying to people 'you are ok; it is good that you exist'. This is part of the role of the priest, and the role of The Church: to tell people, to show people, that they are loved – loved radically, absolutely and unreservedly. That is when we become ministers of joy.

When Pope Benedict comes to this country, I hope that we will listen hard enough to pick up this message through all the distractions and the noise. I hope that he will help us feel a little more joyful. I hope that he will give to us something of the spirit of St. Josephine Bakhita, who he introduced to us in his letter *Spe Salvi*. Born in Sudan she was sold into slavery at the age of 8, and knew little but cruelty and violence until she was brought to Italy where she found Jesus Christ, and at last she knew that she was loved. 'I am definitively loved and whatever happens to me – I am awaited by this Love. And so my life is good'<sup>8</sup>. That is the joy that Pope Benedict wants for us all. What more is there to say?

---

<sup>5</sup> See for example *Deus Caritas Est* nn 9, 17; *Sacramentum Caritatis* n. 97.

<sup>6</sup> *Spe Salvi* n. 12

<sup>7</sup> Mass at Floriana 18/04/10

<sup>8</sup> *Spe Salvi* n.3