

JUBILEE - REJOICING CHURCH

(Luke 6.17-31 and Philipians 4.4-9)

You know how the Innuits have about 30 words for snow. Well there are a similar number of words in the Bible containing the word joy. Jubilee, jubilation, celebration and the one we translate as Rejoice - meaning *showing* your joy again and again. Think of times when you have been overwhelmed by joy.

In December when we went to see our newly born grand daughter we met our undemonstrative farmer son-in-law in the hospital car park. He caught me and swung me round. 'Isn't it grand' he said - and it was. Pure joy. How about in church or when praying? Think on!

The Gospels are full of stories of Jesus celebrating. His first miracle was at a wedding. Stories often involved banquets and he often partied - often with disreputable people. The religious leaders protested - holy men were supposed to live ascetic lives. Even the night before he died he was host at a special meal. Spoke lots about his joy and our joy.

In our Gospel reading - in the middle of his picture of God's Kingdom Jesus says that his followers (that's us) will rejoice and will leap for joy. We often forget how radical Jesus' teaching is. His way is truly against the flow. Love your enemies - do good to those who hate you. Go the extra mile. Give to those who ask. The early church is described as turning the world upside down. God is there. Does it still?

And this great rejoicing comes after Jesus describes his followers being poor, hungry, weeping, hated, excluded, insulted, rejected as evil - and then we will rejoice and leap for joy - wow! Why? Because great is our reward in heaven. But be careful. Heaven for Jesus meant God's presence, His Kingdom here and now. We miss the point if we think these words of Jesus are a list of rules. Instead it is all about Jesus who he was and how he was bringing in God's rule on earth - the start of his church.

Let's put this in context. After Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist and being filled with the Spirit he spent 40 days in the wilderness preparing for his work.

Then Jesus went into this local synagogue and read out Isaiah's prophecy about God setting up his Kingdom on earth with the coming of the Messiah. Jesus announced that this time has come. This is the year of the Lord's favour. Jesus was thrown out of the village.

Jesus began to fulfil the prophecies about the Messiah. He healed the sick, exorcised demons, controlled the sea, forgave a man his sins, healed a man on the Sabbath and spoke especially to the poor. He provoked a strong reaction because God's Kingdom was unexpectedly different. And that is true today. Jesus can make people feel uncomfortable, he hits a nerve.

The Jews knew that God's presence was always unexpected. They sought God's presence. It made them stick out as a group because one day a week they didn't work - very unusual in an agricultural society. The Sabbath was to them very important. A time of joy and celebration. God created all things in six days and on the 7th rested in his creation, his Temple. God told them every 7th day was God's day and every seventh year belonged to him. The land had a rest being kept fallow. It was a time to take stock and learn from God. Even today some people are lucky enough to have a Sabbatical.

This wasn't all. After 7 sabbaticals - on the 50th year there was declared a jubilee. It would be once in a lifetime. At that jubilee slaves were freed and debts were written off and land was returned to previous holders - because the earth is the Lord's and everything in it. People lived differently. And the word at the middle of jubilee is joy. The joy of the presence of God. And there was also an awareness that in the last days God would come into his creation and would set up his kingdom here. Habakkuk says, 'The earth shall be filled with the knowledge of God like the waters cover the sea'.

And Jesus says that time has come. The glory of God that was once seen by Moses at Mount Sinai and in the Temple is now there in Jesus. And because of Jesus' death and *resurrection* this glory of God now rests on us his disciples. The church is the body of Christ. Our bodies are God's Temples the place where God dwells.

That is why the church rejoices and leaps for joy. The glory of God comes into Jesus - not the Temple - and so to us. When we suffer persecution we know we are on the right lines because Jesus told us this would happen. We are in a

way uniting with Jesus in His sufferings and that makes us closer to him. Looking at life from God's viewpoint not our own.

Let's now look at the letter Paul wrote to the young church in Philippi. He writes Rejoice in the Lord - always. 'I will say it again - Rejoice!' Be glad in God - revel in him. Express your joy. And Paul who once persecuted the first Christians wrote this letter from prison - in shackles facing execution. Why should they rejoice? - 'Because God is near and His peace will guard our hearts and minds in Jesus'. This is the wonder of it all. We don't realize what we are part of. Our vision of God is too small.

We need to take seriously what it is to be a disciple of Christ. And it would help if we looked around us anywhere for signs of God's Kingdom. Anything that is true, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent and praiseworthy. Think on these godly things and the God of peace will be with you.

Brothers and sisters let us be faithful to our calling and be full of joy.