

## Reflections on Spirituality and Joy

William Tyndale in the prologue to his English translation of the New Testament, published in 1525:

"Evangelio (that we cal gospel) is a greke word, and signyfyth good, mery, glad and joyful tidings, that maketh a mannes hert glad, and maketh hym synge, daunce, and leepe for ioye."

(quoted in Sherwood Wirt, *Jesus: Man of Joy*, 190)

In Umberto Eco's novel *The Name of the Rose* a monk commits several murders in his monastery to prevent the revealing of a dangerous message in an old manuscript. The message?

"...the danger lay in its praise of folly, its elevation of laughter to a high place in theology, its celebration of joy as essential to genuine spirituality."

(in Needham, *He Who Laughed First*, 153)

At various times and places in the history of spirituality people have suggested that true spirituality requires not only seriousness of purpose, but also seriousness in manner. Real saints, after all, curtail laughter and constrain joy, or at least any visible signs of it. Some, now and then, seem to have succeeded. Yet we might well ask whether the celebration of joy is, in fact, essential to genuine spirituality. Please consider the following ideas.

### **God is joyful.**

**Dallas Willard:**

"We should, to begin with, think that God leads a very interesting life, and that he is full of joy. Undoubtedly he is the most joyous being in the universe. The abundance of his love and generosity is inseparable from his infinite joy. All of the good and beautiful things from which we occasionally

drink tiny droplets of soul-exhilarating joy, God continuously experiences in all their breadth and depth and richness."

(*The Divine Conspiracy*, 62)

Jesus, who shows us the Father, was a person of great joy, not simply a "man of sorrows."

### **God wants us to be joyful.**

Perhaps the boldest, though certainly not the only, evidence of this is Jesus' promise of and prayer for our joy in the Gospel of John. (e.g., John 15:11; 16:16-24; 17:13)

### **God makes us joyful.**

What Jesus promised and prayed for is a major natural outcome of our life in God. You can add many other texts to these:

Rom. 14:17 For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

Gal. 5:22 By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace...

In the message found sewn in Blaise Pascal's coat, about a deep spiritual experience:

"Joy, Joy, Joy, tears of joy."

(quoted in Sherwood Wirt, *The God Who Smiles*, 58)

#### **Dallas Willard:**

"...[God's] spirit and the spirit of our relationship rules out all paralyzing and oppressive attitudes and enables every aspect of our lives to be a joyous journey through the fields of the Lord.

"Joy is our portion in his fellowship. Joy goes with confidence and creativity. It is his joy, and that is not a small joy or a repressed 'joy.' It is a robust joy, with no small element of outright hilarity in it. For nothing less than joy can sustain us in the kingdom rightness that possesses us, which truly is a

weighty and powerful thing to bear. It was not for nothing that Mother Teresa of Calcutta required her sisters of charity to be people who smile."  
(*The Divine Conspiracy*, 290-1)

**Columba Marmion:**

"Joy is the echo of God's life in us."  
(quoted in Ann Ball, *The Saints' Guide to Joy that Never Fades*, 11)

**John of the Cross:**

"The soul of one who loves God always swims in joy, always keeps holiday, and is always in the mood for singing."  
(quoted in Ann Ball, *The Saints' Guide to Joy that Never Fades*, 69)

**Doris Donnelly:**

"Joy is not the sentiment of people who have lost their marbles and their hold on reality. Nor is it a pious wish, but rather a permanent, all-pervasive character of the Christian, irrepressibly active, filled with inward satisfaction and outgoing benediction." "...The early Christian communities understood themselves as post-Pentecost communities of joy, and anything that deflected that joy warranted a red-alert warning."  
(quoted in Phil Needham, *He Who Laughed First*, 132)

**Billy Sunday:**

"If you have no joy, there's a leak in your Christianity somewhere."  
(quoted in Sherwood Wirt, *The God Who Smiles*, 60)

Even in times of trouble or hardship Christians in the NT and beyond found the path of joy:

**Clare of Assisi:**

"Melancholy is the poison of devotion. When one is in tribulation, it is necessary to be more happy and more joyful because one is nearer to God."  
(quoted in Ann Ball, *The Saints' Guide to Joy that Never Fades*, 128)

**Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador:**

Christians must always nourish in their hearts the fullness of joy. Try it, brothers and sisters; I have tried it many times and in the darkest moments, when slander and persecution were at their worst: to unite myself intimately with Christ, my friend ...It is the deepest joy the heart can have."

(quoted in Ann Ball, *The Saints' Guide to Joy that Never Fades*, 120)

**God calls us to be joyful.**

Joy is a choice, not only a result. In the Psalms, in Paul, and beyond we are told to rejoice, to praise God. In doing this:

- *We celebrate God's goodness with joy.* Sometimes it overflows, we're overjoyed, and we participate in actions often associated in the Bible with joy - shouting, dancing, laughing, and singing.

- *We win the world with joy.*

"...joy was given to the Church *for the world*- that the Church might be a witness to it and transform the world by joy."

(Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 55)

**Francis of Assisi:**

"It is not fitting that a servant of God should offer to men the spectacle of sadness and trouble, but rather one of constant cheerfulness."

(quoted in Ann Ball, *The Saints' Guide to Joy that Never Fades*, 25)

- *We serve the world with joy.*

**Mother Teresa (of Calcutta):**

"He gives most who gives with joy."

"That's the spirit of our society, that total surrender, loving trust, cheerfulness. We must be able to radiate the joy of Christ, express it in our

actions. If our actions are just useful actions that give no joy to the people, our poor people would never be able to rise up to the call which we want them to hear, the call to come closer to God. We want to make them feel that they are loved. If we went to them with a sad face, we would only make them much more depressed."

(quoted in Ann Ball, *The Saints' Guide to Joy that Never Fades*, 77-8)

### **Negative effects of neglecting joy**

"... from its very beginning Christianity has been the proclamation of joy.... Without the proclamation of this joy Christianity is incomprehensible. It is only as joy that the Church was victorious in the world, and it lost the world when it lost that joy, and ceased to be a credible witness to it. Of all accusations against Christians, the most terrible one was uttered by Nietzsche when he said that Christians had no joy."

(Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 24)

#### **Lloyd John Ogilvie:**

"Joy is the missing ingredient in contemporary Christianity. The problem is our powerless piousness and grim religiosity."

(quoted in Sherwood Wirt, *Jesus: Man of Joy*, 187)

"We make the way to Jesus seem too steep for the ordinary person. There are too many flights of stairs, too much religious blathering. We transmute the upbeat promises of joy, good cheer, and lightheartedness that are indigenous in the New Testament into something legalistic, heavy, depressing. Even though people really like and admire Jesus, they don't feel good enough or strong enough to make the spiritual effort to follow Him (yet Jesus said, "My burden is light")."

(Sherwood Wirt, *Jesus: Man of Joy*, 185)

"The biblical writers, it is assumed, were a humorless lot.... The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob - and the God of Jesus and Paul - is also imagined to be totally humorless: infinite in gravity and without interest in children. The worshipers of this God, therefore, are presumably called to emulate such gravity. The suggestion is that the greater the degree of holiness, the

lesser the degree of laughter and humor....This understanding, however, serves better as a definition of sanctimoniousness and a pretext for fanaticism....At best, humorlessness is more likely to qualify one for becoming a bishop than a saint, and even more likely, an inquisitor or an executioner."

(Conrad Hyers, *And God Created Laughter*, 4-5)

[prepared(rev.) by Howard R. Macy, 1/2002(03)]