

Thirsting for God — Joy

Philippians 4:4-7

"Don't worry...be happy." What do you think of when you hear these words? They take me back to 1988, the year of Australia's bicentenary, my second year of pastoral training at Luther Seminary, and in my early twenties, a time of finding my identity, my place, negotiating relationships and seeking a sense of self-worth.



And then along comes this song, by the American singer, Bobby McFerrin. Those of us over a certain age will surely remember it. This is how it goes

'Here's a little song I wrote
You might want to sing it note for note
Don't worry, be happy
In every life we have some trouble
But when you worry you make it double
Don't worry, be happy
Don't worry, be happy'

I know this song was designed to drive away all worries and concerns, but it had the opposite effect on me. "Don't worry, be happy." I know these words were meant to comfort and encourage me, but all they did was attack me. I used to think to myself, 'I am worried ... I'm not happy ... What kind of a miserable person does this make me?' And so the song drove barbs into me.

Perhaps you feel the same way as you approach Christmas. You know that you should be happy, but the feeling just isn't coming, and you're made to feel all the worse as you remove all the advertising from your overstretched letter-box and see pictures of smiling, happy people everywhere. Or switch on the TV and see ads for happy families gathered for Christmas lunch. It's enough to take up the cause of Ebenezer Scrooge and say, 'Bah! Humbug.'



"Don't worry...be happy." It's not one of the most profound, nor most helpful songs ever written. At Christmas people do worry, and this worry creates the opposite of happiness.

Helping agencies know that from now until school returns is the busiest

time of the year. People fall apart because they can't live up to the expectations placed on them by family members, friends, and the culture of Christmas celebration.

"Don't worry...be happy." It's an upbeat sentiment, but hard to fulfil. In any case, happiness itself is such a fleeting thing, and so thoroughly dependent on our feelings. Happiness can evaporate as quickly as it takes someone to bump into your car in the shopping centre car park, or indeed, to steal a parking spot from you.

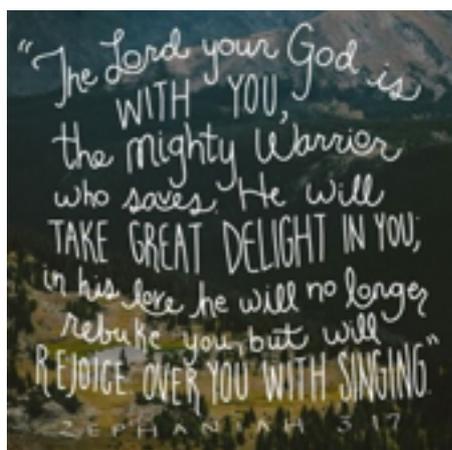
Perhaps we need to substitute the word "happy" for "joy" or joyful and we might begin to make some headway. According to my Bible software, the words 'happy' and 'happiness' only appears 26 times, but joy and its synonym joyful appear 270 times.



So let's edit the lyrics of Bobby McFerrin's song to "Don't worry...be joyful." God and joy — two three letter words that are intimately connected. That's why Paul says to the congregation on Philippi: "Rejoice in the Lord always; I will say it again: Rejoice." To which

he adds a little later: "Do not be anxious about anything..."

When Paul wrote this, his most personal of letters, he was in prison. But instead of languishing there, he devoted himself to caring for the people of God entrusted to him. This wasn't simply a case of occupying his mind so as to block out the pain of the present situation, but a genuine response to the grace of God so richly at work in his life. As Paul says in the first chapter of this letter: "I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance...for to me, living is Christ and dying is gain." When Paul was in prison in Philippi itself, Luke tells us that "about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymn to God."



How could Paul find joy in the worst of situations? Only because his life was founded on the saving work of Jesus Christ, only because he came to know Jesus personally on the road to Damascus, only because this relationship permeated every aspect of his life. He knew the joy of the promise given to Zephaniah: "The Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing."

Paul's call to be joyful, then is no self-help mantra, empty words said over and over again to make a bad situation good, but based on who God was and what God had done in the Lord, Jesus Christ.

"Rejoice in the Lord always." Why? Because "the Lord is near!" Near in a double sense — in his promise to return, closer now than the previous day. Jesus himself says, "Stand up and raise you heads, because your redemption is drawing near." We need not be ashamed, because the one who comes to

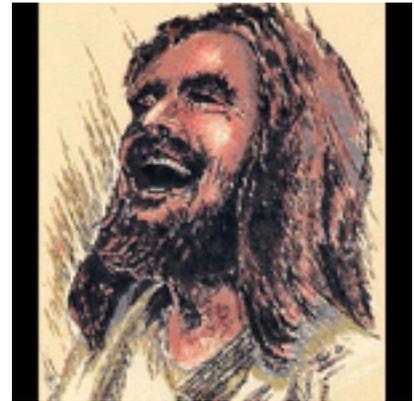


judge the world is our Saviour and Deliverer. When he comes, he will bring an end to all the things that cause us pain, stress and sadness. There's joy in anticipation.

But near also in the sense of his presence in us and through us. He is Immanuel, God with us, here and now too. We live in the reality of the advent of Christ within us. Christ has been birthed in our hearts through faith, joined to the crucified and risen Jesus forever through baptism. The Holy Spirit is his presence, making our joy complete. Jesus is present in his holy word, the word that stands forever, powerful and mighty, life-shaping, and in his body and blood in the bread and wine of Holy Communion. These three things means that we are intimately and always connected to the source of joy, love and peace.

I am reminded of Jesus' response to the seventy two disciples returning from their first foray as his missionaries. They return full of joy, breathless with excitement about the power of Jesus to transform lives, healing, speaking hope, casting out evil spirits. Jesus' response is enlightening:

"At that time, Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, 'I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure.'" Can you feel the joy in Jesus, overflowing from his Father, flowing through the lives of his disciples?



The Christian author, Dallas Willard writes: "Jesus himself was and is a joyous, creative person. He does not allow us to continue thinking of our Father who fills and overflows space as a morose and miserable monarch, a frustrated and petty parent, or a policemen on the prowl. One of the outstanding features of Jesus' personality was precisely an abundance of joy. This he left to his students, 'that their joy might be full.'"

do not be anxious
about anything, but
in every situation,
by prayer and petition,
with thanksgiving,
present your request
to God.

Philippians 4:6

We can live secure in the joy of the Father and the Son. It's not joy that we have to manufacture; it's joy that is God's gift, like every blessing that God bestows on us. That's why Paul can go on to say, 'Don't be anxious about anything, but in prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.' The trick in this complex life is to know where to go with our problems. Prayer is simply an acknowledgment of our inability to change all the situations that confront us, a trust in the love and compassion of God to do something about it, and a letting go of final and damning responsibility for

everything.

Sometimes it's impossible not to be anxious, when worry tips over into clinical anxiety, as I have experienced at various points in my life. But even then, although anxiety and its symptoms persisted for a time, prayer helped to place me in God's care in the chaos, even when I didn't feel it. I can best describe it in the words of Isaiah from last Wednesday's Advent devotion: "You who call on the Lord, give yourselves no rest, and give him no rest till he establishes Jerusalem and makes her the praise of the earth." (Isaiah 62:6) I continually called God out on his promises, and asked him to make them real, in my heart and mind.

From prayer comes peace. "The peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." Philippi was a Roman garrison town, a military headquarters. Paul prays literally that God's peace would garrison us, keeping the peace even in the face of bitter attack. Hearts, the centre of our wills, and minds, the source of our thoughts, are safeguarded and directed by the peace of God, through his Holy Spirit.



"Let your gentleness be evident to all." A gentle spirit arises out of trust, knowing that God is the creator, not us. We are secure in Christ. We are the apple of our heavenly Father's eye. The Holy Spirit intercedes for us, praying for us, guiding us. We don't have to constantly shore up our position before God, and nor do we have to act to impress other people or knock others down in order to lift ourselves up.

The word that Paul uses here stretches across a whole list of qualities that bring joy to others: big-heartedness, geniality, being considerate, charitable, generous. Isn't that how you would

want to be known? I would. May God use us to bring joy at a time of the year which is stressful and joyless for many.

"Don't worry...be joyful." So "rejoice in the Lord always: again I will say, Rejoice... The Lord is near... And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." Amen.

