

SERMON FOR TRINITY 7 | 30 July 2017

It's funny how certain people from the past suddenly come to mind. Looking through some old photograph albums for pictures of my time at St John's in Durham (I was asked to take some pictures of the visit of the Queen Mother there in 1980 and the current generation want to add them to the archives) I came across a picture of Dr Willie Morrice. There he stands alongside the Queen Mother, both beaming broadly.

Now Willie Morrice was a Scot and his claim to fame was that he wrote a book called *'Joy in the New Testament'*. I have to say (when the Queen Mother wasn't there) that Dr Morrice was usually a bit shy if not a bit dour! Nevertheless 'joy' in the Bible was his special interest and I remember his introducing the subject with these fairly obvious questions: how many times does the word Joy occurs in the New Testament? [63] - and for good measure how many times in the Old Testament [155]? Clearly it is therefore a pretty important theme – even for a dour Scot!

CS Lewis - whose Narnia books like 'the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe' and his really helpful tracts on Christianity (some of which you may have read) - was both a bachelor and an atheist for much of his young adult life. Then he fell in love, first with God and then, at the age of 44, with an American Jewish wife and mother, Joy Davidman who read his books in the US and left her family behind to be with him. Sadly for them, after they got together she quickly developed cancer and CS Lewis had to nurse her through her final illness, a story told in *Shadowlands* and in a book CS Lewis wrote after her death, *A grief observed*.

As with Dr Willie Morrice, the abiding theme in CS Lewis' writings became the abiding gift of 'Joy', which he described as God's gift to every Christian.

But, you say to yourself, that isn't my experience at all! The need for Faith I understand; and the call to Hope – to believe in things we can't yet see, yes. But Joy? So many Christians – unless they are from the happy-clappy community – seem completely devoid of any kind of joy although I was glad that some visitors to St James' last Sunday remarked what a happy lot you seemed to be!!

Now I grant you: quite a lot of whether we appear joyful is to do with age and temperament: perhaps we aren't outwardly demonstrative types – all hugging and kissing, with hands in the air all singing Alleluia! But surely we don't have to be wild charismatics to be full of joy?

Perhaps, then, we need to recalibrate the word of joy slightly and to suggest that joy is often an expression not of giggly enthusiasm but something much deeper: joy comes from a sense of confidence, overwhelming confidence in the love of God and the feeling, in the words of Cardinal Newman, that God has some special plan for our lives and that – ultimately he knows what he is doing ... whether we understand it or not.

Which led me to ask: what can we do to share in what can be described as joy or confidence?

Yesterday I spent a fascinating hour with a young couple who are hoping to bring their children to baptism next year. One of the partners isn't baptized, the other one is. Their experiences of Church life are very different from one another too.

But as that conversation unfolded I got such a strong sense of joy – the kind of sensation that the disciples picked up from Jesus on the road to Emmaus. As we began to lift the lid on the contents of what Christianity has to offer, there was a palpable change in the atmosphere as, bit by bit, a few of their questions began to fall into place. I am not sure it was quite a 'eureka!' moment but it was certainly something very real and exciting.

So what do we do in the pre-Baptism and pre-Confirmation course that we run at St James' - usually noted in the Weekly News sheet under the slightly cryptic title, 'Basic Christianity'?

While we loosely call this 'a course' it is much more open and flexible than that. Everything we do starts with the verse that we used for today's Gospel acclamation: *I call you friends, says the Lord, because I have made known to you everything that I have learned from my Father...*

Put another way, our sessions start with a story or a passage from the Bible – and then we see where it takes us. And I guess 90% of what we end up talking about flows from the experiences of those taking part in the sessions: that is because God uses what has happened to us and what we have thought about in the past ‘to bring the Old and New Testaments to life’.

Even in the nine months or so we have available we can’t talk about everything but in the mix there will be some reflections on the way God calls people to faith today – and how he has done that in the past. In that section we will think about the disciples by the lake as well as Elijah in the desert and Moses in Egypt.

We will wrestle with the way God seems to change the way he works with human beings – from the unbending rule-giver with the Ten Commandments to the much more gentle teacher as revealed in Jesus the healer of the sick and troubled. We spend time looking at the last few weeks of Jesus’ life and we talk about why he had to die; we look at the way he prepared the disciples to take on his work after the Resurrection.

In the second section of ‘Basic Christianity’ we delve into the Book of Acts to see how SS Peter and Paul wrestled with the difficulties of their day, seeing how slavery and the position of women then are mirrored in the 21st century in the issues of war and peace, sexuality and women’s leadership in the Church.

This inevitably takes us into all kinds of fascinating corners in Church history – the Early Church, the creation of different denominations and what each of them believes – and the hopes and challenges of trying to reunite the churches today.

And the third section is about prayer, the different ways of being a faithful Christian and how we build together the local church.

As if that wasn’t enough we also build into the course proper preparation for baptism, for First Holy Communion and for Confirmation, enjoying each of those celebrations when they come.

How can our churches be full of joy? In my experience only when as many as possible are engaged in studying the basics of our faith, to the point when they can rely on those truths carrying them when the going gets tough.

It is huge privilege for me to be involved in these 'Basic Christianity' sessions. And while no course will ever be able to answer all the questions, the key thing is for us to develop the skills to at least explore the issues that come up, and learn how to discuss them with other people.

And now for the final plug! A new 'Basic Christianity' course will start again at St James' towards the end of September. You don't have to be preparing for the sacraments of baptism and confirmation to take part; you may just enjoy refreshing what you have picked up in the past.

But what I am certain of is that all the time spent reflecting on our faith will be time well spent and will give us the 'joy' that Jesus always wants for us – not froth and what can pass for fun, but a deep feeling of confidence in the blessings that God alone can give.