Along the track

Joy to the World

Some years ago, I was in London just before Christmas. It was pretty miserable, despite all the lights and decorations and the crowds. The weather was freezing, the snow had turned to sludge and homesickness had set in. The streets were lined with lights and decorations and buskers were everywhere. That lifted everyone's spirits. It was joyful, happy and it felt well… like Christmas! But there was one thing missing. Home.

It is not by chance that the angel announces the Christmas message: "I am bringing you good news of great joy," (Luke 2:10) because joy is an integral part of the Christian story, in fact there is no Christian story without it. Jesus brought joy to so many lives – to those whose sight was restored to those he 'made clean', to those he cured and to those who found meaning and purpose in his message, to those who found forgiveness.

Long time writer on spirituality, Fr Ronald Rolheiser offers this insight: *For lots of reasons we find it hard to think of God as happy, as joyful, as pleased, and (as Julian of Norwich says) as relaxed and smiling. In our popular conception, we all conceive of God as male, as celibate, and as generally displeased and disappointed with us. We struggle to think that God is happy with our lives and, even more important, that God is happy, joyful, relaxed, and smiling.*

That's not all that surprising, especially if you are around my age. God was presented as judgemental, someone to be feared, rather than someone to call "Abba."

We were not introduced to God in terms like:

> *By his revelation, the invisible God, from the fullness of his love, addresses us as friends, and moves among us, in order to invite us into his own company.* #Catechism 142,

Nor were we told:

> *Do not be afraid,*
> *I have redeemed you:*
> *I have called you by your name,*
> *You are mine*
> Isaiah 43:1

Or that:

> *You are precious in my sight*
> *and honoured,*
> *And I love you*
> Isaiah 43: 4

The scriptures are full of such messages and Jesus' life was one that brought joy to so many, but for some reason we tend to ignore that. The late Pope Francis wrote about the joy of the Gospel and how we encounter joy when we really come to understand Jesus. Christmas is another reminder that without joy, there is no room for hope. Joy is not an over-the-top way of acting, a passing fad or emotion, a paste-on-a-smile. It is not always there, because there can be times of sadness and confusion, of doubt and anxiety.

Joy doesn't hang around without a little effort to keep it there. Joy is not something to be forced. It comes when one is ready and open for it to rise and take hold and that can be a surprise sometimes. It is not always predictable. People with genuine joy deliberately find something, however small, that draws forth gratitude, pleasure, wonder, and love within each day. They go looking for them and often find them in the most unusual and unexpected places.

Did the shepherds go to work that day expecting to find an angel that night, or a baby in a manger? Perhaps when we go searching, we may not find an angel but Jesus, the source of our joy is out there waiting. The music in Oxford Street brought joy to so many in these dismal surroundings but others passed grimly by, oblivious to the music, focused on something else.

Joy does not always come because good things happen to us, but there is joy in giving, even if it is just our time, even if is just listening to someone, who needs to be heard, or just being present to those we love or to the stranger who crosses our path. Joy can come when we hear the laughter of children and encourage it, when we see a need and we try to do something about it, joy can come when we have taken some time to count our blessings and decide that we want to be a blessing to others this Christmas.

Just before Christmas a few years ago on the train home to Warragul we were joined in our carriage by a group of students from one of the local high schools. They'd had a bad day, busking in the city. They had earned less than forty dollars. Their teacher asked us if they could sing for us. It made a rather boring trip into quite a joy-filled experience and by the end of our trip, the whole carriage had joined in and chipped in for their charity as well. Joy is around us and within us if we go looking, especially at Christmas as the angel reminded us!

Regards
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