

What bring happiness in our life? What fills us with hope and joy?

On Monday I had a wonderful day. After much waiting and anticipation I received through my letterbox on Sunday afternoon a copy of the new Harry Potter book. It is a play script for the new play which premiered on Saturday afternoon, and I had pre-ordered my copy to be delivered as soon as it was available.

Last Sunday Fr Laurence lamented to me that the forecast for Monday was wet and colder than it had been – but I was overjoyed by this news as it seemed like I had been given a perfect day off – a day when I could sit and read my new book without feeling like I should be outside mowing the lawn. (Which I finally did yesterday)

And what a wonderful day it was!

I enjoyed reading the whole of the book in one day – and stopping to make some of my favourite things along the way – chicken and vegetable soup!

I felt so happy and relaxed at the end of the day – I really was filled with joy. (I won't give the plot away – but it was a great read)

This – and the slightly slower pace of August has made this a wonderful week.

I have had time to sit and listen to people's stories – and finish some tasks that have been hanging around – and not just because there are no meetings – but also because I have the wonderful memory of Monday.

During life, there will be many moments which fill us with joy or happiness for lots of different reasons, as there will be moments that fill us with despair – but these are the marks of our humanity – that we have lived and known and experienced – and our faith becomes part of what defines this humanity – something which strengthens us and calls us to look to the future, no matter how dark the present might feel.

All our readings today focus our hearts and minds on the nature of the fulfilment and joy which God wants us to have. A fulfilment that comes from living out our humanity – and in our living also recognising and celebrating God within our midst too.

The opening sequence to Isaiah is a wonderful image of the pain of humanity and the hope which God offers. The prophet says – look you have done evil – yes you must lament – but more importantly step forward and change – you need to be *willing and obedient* (v20).

In this passage God is rejecting sacrifices that are meant to manipulate. *God if you just fix this I will...* I suspect at some point in our lives we have all done it. These passages from Isaiah reflect the outcome of a relationship between God, and God's people that has become fractured – and the prophet is from the start of this work

outlining what needs to be done to restore this relationship and to bring fulfilment – not only of God’s promise but to the people. God is calling the people to have faith.

In a sense, when Jesus addresses the community in Luke’s gospel he is doing the same thing- he starts by addressing the community and confirming that they are his – but again he, like Isaiah before him is attempting to address manipulation – and to focus the minds of the community back on God.

This however is too simple – because Jesus is trying to help us have an even bigger vision than this - Jesus promises that God has given everything so that we do not need to be afraid. He reinforces this by talking about how God will serve us later in the text. The reminders are around the gift of life and creation, the gift of eternal life, the gift of the Holy Spirit in Baptism, and the gift of Christ’s body and blood in Communion¹. Then within this is a reminder to look at our priorities – how are we living this gift of creation – this gift of possibility? Are we noticing when God is with us, and all that God is giving us – or do we allow ourselves to be distracted?

Do we notice what brings us joy, as well as what brings us pain?

These are difficult times, the world is in a mess and we want God to fix it.

But God wants more than just for things to be fixed – God wants a relationship, and wants us to be open to the possibilities of what is before us.

Today, and over the next 3 Sunday’s we are going to be hearing a series of readings from the letter to the Hebrews. We rarely get to hear from this letter. It is possibly one of the most complex of the epistles, and has a very different style. It is not written by either Peter or Paul, and authorship is debated. There are many scholars who see this letter as a continuation of the Hebrew Scriptures, the ending of the Old Testament if you like – which draws together the images and stories of the Hebrew people into the context of Christ as the Temple. Regardless of its overall purpose what we do know is that the people it was written to were a community under siege.

The community to whom Hebrews was written had undergone great hardship, including public ridicule, confiscation of property, and imprisonment (10:32-34). Because of the pressures put upon the community, some had apostatized (6:4-6), others avoided worship (10:25). Still others were weary of the suffering and disheartened by the delay in the coming of the Lord that would confirm their belief (3:14), a belief that came at great cost. Into this situation comes one of the most quoted verses in the bible when it comes to faith:

‘Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible’

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2950

So Faith, rather than being something ultimately dependent upon us, comes to us at God's own initiative through God's Word, and engenders a hope-filled response to the promises of God. This response of trust in God makes "visible" -- through the lives of the assembly of believers -- what otherwise would remain "invisible." In other words, one who trusts God's promises is *God's own* witness to the new creation that is breaking into our "everyday" visible world through the gospel of Christ Jesus.

In short, God's *invisible* work of new creation becomes *visible* (incarnate) in the life of the one who trusts God.

The common thread of all our readings today – trust in the relationship – even when all else seems to be overwhelming, and as we discussed last week – take responsibility for the things that we can change now; or bring about ourselves.

And when it feels too hard, too painful – when we want to cry out to God 'why!' – then maybe we can turn back to the opening verse of our gospel reading:

"Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

"Do not be afraid" is the hallmark of good news through Scripture and occurs multiple times in Luke's story of Jesus as well. Typically, "Do not be afraid," is the rhetorical prelude to the announcement of God's mighty and saving deeds. And it is the starting point and anchor for everything else in this passage. It is God's good pleasure - God's intention, plan, and delight - to give us the kingdom!

What Jesus is saying to the disciples is at heart quite simple, and yet is the most difficult thing for us humans. Regardless of the temptations or trials of life – God really wants you to have faith, to enjoy faith, to inherit the Kingdom of heaven.

Faith may well be the hardest thing we ever have to work at, but it is built on the relationship with God we have in prayer and on our ability to let go.

The key however for us as Christians however is that this is not about us, it is not a spiritual journey based on self-actualisation – or even about our knowing (though of course some of that may happen along the way). but rather discovering that as we give ourselves away in relationship and service we find a deeper sense of self than we'd imagined possible. We are born for community and find a sense of self and meaning and purpose as we trust God's promises and give ourselves away in love.²

In the end then, the primary call of the church today is to become a place where we are so rooted in the promise of God's good pleasure, reminded of our identity as God's beloved children, and affirmed in our inherent self-worth and dignity, that we

² <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/08/pentecost-12-c-what-would-you-do/>

can, indeed, see all those around us as similarly beloved and deserving of self-worth, dignity, and God's good pleasure.³

So, as we go into this week, as we continue to enjoy the pace of August – or maybe we even feel challenged by it - Christ says to us... Do not be afraid, Faith, is not dependent upon us, but rather God is made visible when we dare to hope in God, when we value the relationship; and even more when we dare to rejoice in God's good pleasure. For in doing so, we may transform all that is hurting around us!
Amen

³ <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/08/pentecost-12-c-what-would-you-do/>