

As I said last week the plan for Lent this year is to treat each Sunday's sermon slot as a session of a Lent study course, similar to what I did in Advent. But this time it calls for a little more introduction and some notes for want of a better description for you take home and ponder on during the week. So all of this is based on a book *The Joy of the Gospel*¹ (or *Evangelii Gaudium* to give it the Latin title) which was written by Pope Francis in 2013. While it is a work with a specific message for the Roman Catholic Church meaning some of it is not relevant to us, it is also a document which captures something profound about the joy that comes from proclaiming the Gospel in a way that is meant for each one of us as Christians.

Some of you may be familiar with *The Joy of Gospel* by Pope Francis or even read it when it was first published two years ago. It is still available in print and you may want to read it in full. We are just going to look at some of the key points in the *Joy of Gospel* each week as a framework for our sermon slot. So each week I will give you one or two excerpts from *Joy of the Gospel*, a passage of scripture (which is also our Epistle or Gospel reading for that Sunday) and something to think about during the week. My "sermon" will then be based on these passages and scripture.

Just one further comment on reading the Scripture. The *Joy of the Gospel* uses a spiritual way of reading scripture which is very much part of the Christian monastic tradition, *lectio divina*, or *divine reading*. This is a way of listening to a scripture passage with what St Benedict so graphically calls *the ear of our heart*. Pope Francis says that this *spiritual reading* begins with an understanding of the scripture before going on to discern how the passage speaks to our own lives. We can use this way of reading for scripture but also for other spiritual writings like *The Joy of the Gospel*.

So introduction over with, and now onto our first look at *The Joy of the Gospel*. **READ EXTRACTS FROM NOTES AND REREAD PHILIPPIANS**

¹ *The Joy of the Gospel (Evangelii Gaudium)*: an Apostolic Exhortation by Pope Francis. 2013

Running through the New Testament we find the strand of rejoicing: people are commanded to rejoice and they do rejoice time and time again. This part of Paul's letter to the Philippians is probably the most memorable New Testament passage on rejoicing. Paul wrote this letter from prison in Rome at a very hard time in his life. Yet, the theme of joy is woven throughout the letter. If you think back to Advent and the Annunciation the word translated here as Rejoice is the same greeting the Angel Gabriel gave to Mary in Luke's gospel. So there is a sense in which Paul is asking the Philippians to be people who both greet God and people who find their joy in God.

Paul and Francis both speak to us of an experience of Christian faith which is filled with deep and lasting joy. I wonder how true this really is?

I guess the first thing we need to understand is that joy is not the same thing as happiness. I defy anyone to be happy all the time and if they are I wonder what medications they might be taking. At our Eucharist on Ash Wednesday I read a reflective prayer which had a line which as stayed with me over the last few days:

I would rejoice, not with that surface joy that sometimes overlies my true feelings, but with deep-down joy that throbs through life in spite of pain.

Real joy, God-given joy, has its roots in the faith, the trust that God loves us now and will never stop loving us whatever happens. This is the amazing basis of our faith and sometimes we just need to stop and ponder the enormity of this fact. God loves us now and will never stop whatever happens. We are loved infinitely and unconditionally. When people said this to me in the past I sort of understood unconditionally to mean depending on what I had done or not done. My understanding was that God's love was not dependant on my sins, my actions or my thoughts. And this is often the emphasis we get in Lent. That unconditional love is all about acknowledging our sins, recognising our sinfulness and repenting. It is about the conditions we create for ourselves.

But what about the conditions we find ourselves in created not by us but by circumstances, the world around us by other people.

The unconditional love of God has taken on a new, and I hope broader meaning, for me as I grow older, if not wiser. I now understand, I think, that God's love is present to me whatever condition I find myself in, unconditionally, not dependant on whether I am happy or sad, relaxed or anxious, stressed or laid back.

This is a source both of enormous freedom and great challenge for me. It is easy to express joy in the good times, but too often it is surface joy. When times are difficult we still have the joy that comes from our faith that God's love for us never, ever fails. Like Paul writing from prison and facing execution still finding words of great joy for the Philippians. The message of joy runs through the Bible from the Prophets, to Gospels and Paul.

Pope Francis in *The Joy of the Gospel* recognising the challenges of the world and still having faith in joy.

I understand the grief of people who have to endure great suffering, yet slowly but surely we all have to let the joy of faith slowly revive as a quiet yet firm trust, even amid the greatest distress.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice!