

“JOY?”
Ecclesiastes 1:1-11; 1 Peter 1:3-9

A fortnight into the new year the programmes reviewing the past year and the newspaper articles chronicling all that happened in 2012 have pretty well run their course. But no doubt we have enjoyed the opportunity to look back at things which inspired us as a nation, the events which we experienced in our community and our church, and the various situations which touched our personal and family lives. Those of you who were here last week will remember that Anne Badcock helped us to look back over the past twelve months and thank God for all the ways in which he had blessed us. And no doubt we'll do the same again next year.

Because we do it every year, don't we? Every year we look back at a catalogue of wars, elections of one sort and another, disasters, famine, tragedy; at triumphs, achievements, conquests. But basically, it's the same as any other year. The wars may have moved from one area to another. There may be different people in power here and elsewhere. The newsreel footage of human misery comes from a different area of the world. The frontiers of science are pushed forwards a fraction by new discoveries. And so on and so on ... But although *different* things have happened, nothing radically *new* has really happened. It's pretty well the same old cycle of events.

Rudyard Kipling once summed it all up in the following lines:

*The craft that we call modern,
The crimes that we call new:
John Bunyan had them typed and filed
In 1682.*

And the contemporary Christian poet Steve Turner put it even more succinctly when he wrote:

*History repeats itself.
It has to.
No-one listens.*

But even those thoughts aren't new, are they? King Solomon (at least, that's who we assume it was), was writing around 3,000 years ago and said exactly the same thing in the book of *Ecclesiastes*. We read from it earlier on, and it can be a very depressing book, full of apparent cynicism, talk of meaninglessness and futility – the kind of thing that could have been written by Jean-Paul Sartre or one of today's nihilistic British novelists. “What's the point?” seems to be the central question, and it's a question that seems to have grown out of the author's observations of life.

A couple of weeks ago I once again had the experience I'm sure many of you (particularly men) have around this time of year – standing outside a shop while the women in your life are seeing how long they can spend in the changing rooms during the sales. As I stood on the corner of busy street in York, I watched the people rushing around – a bit like when you're waiting at a railways station during the rush hour or in an airport terminal. All those people bustling about – and you wonder where they're going, what they're doing, what their lives are really like. In many ways it's like kicking the top off an anthill and seeing thousands of creatures scurrying about in confusion. Solomon looked at life and saw people scurrying about in confusion, “*chasing after wind*”.

In this book, Solomon relates universally observable facts, picking up on things that other people can see but don't necessarily notice. With today's social commentators and stand-up comedians who rely on observations of the absurd for their humour, we may be a little more used to it. But Solomon is writing in the style of the so-called “Wisdom writers” of the ancient world, and there are many similarities with contemporary non-Christian writings – maybe one of the reasons it took a while for this book to be accepted as part of the Bible.

Solomon certainly rams home his message, though. There's nothing really worth doing on this earth: it's just an endless cycle of work and toil that doesn't really achieve anything. In fact, he says in v9, “*What*

has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun". That little phrase "*under the sun*" crops up quite a bit in this book and it is used to refer to this present world and the very real limits there are to what it offers. It's a world apparently without God, a world of frustration and futility, a world in which the whole of creation, seen from this perspective, is just plodding along with no real purpose. In the New Testament, St Paul identifies the same problem in *Romans 8:19-23*:

For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.

This world can seem very joyless, can't it? It can be a very gloomy old place to live, especially under the leaden skies and in the cold dampness of a British winter. And as people lose any kind of moral compass or awareness of the bigger picture, any sense of a god or an eternal dimension, it can also become a very cynical place – just look at the stuff written by the columnists in the papers or spoken by the commentators on television. And *Ecclesiastes* seems to capture something of that – the absurdity and pointlessness of it all. Surely that's not how it was meant to be! In the introduction to his translation of some poems by the French poet Jacques Prévert, the American poet and publisher Lawrence Ferlinghetti writes, "*Man is destined for joy, but there's a permanent conspiracy against it.*" That's what's missing from the lives of so many of us: joy.

Well, the writer and preacher Charles Swindoll says, "*If there is nothing but nothing under the sun, our only hope must be above it.*" Solomon actually does recognise that and although a lot of the time he reflects the thinking of the world around him, which appears to leave God out of account, he suddenly introduces him into the picture and everything changes. Listen to these lines from later in the book – from 2:24,25: "*A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?*" and from 3:9-14: "*What do workers gain from their toil? I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end. I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil – this is the gift of God. I know that everything God does will endure for ever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it.*" *Ecclesiastes* is an exploration of the barrenness, the joylessness of life without a practical faith in God, but hope is brought into the picture, joy returns to the equation when our gaze is turned away from a fixation with the things that are "*under the sun*", towards God and all that he has to offer.

The Italian priest Fra Giovanni once wrote: "*The gloom of the world is but a shadow. Behind it, yet within reach, is joy. There is a radiance and glory within the darkness, could we but see, and to see we have only to look. I beseech you to look.*" All of us, I am sure, have experienced that joy on occasions, have glimpsed something of the glory that can burst into our world. But how do we manage to grab hold of it and make it a consistent part of our lives?

That's where our second reading comes in. Peter is writing in his letter to the new Christians scattered around the Mediterranean at the end of the first century about joy in a gloomy world, a world that for many is marked by suffering and for all of us by vulnerability and fragility. In the words we read from that first chapter of his first letter he writes of a change that can take place through belief in and commitment to Jesus, a change that opens up a new perspective on life. In his letter to the Galatian Christians, Paul calls it being made a "*new creation*". And we can only really get to that point when we recognise the absurdity of this creation, the futility of trying to make the best of things solely through our own efforts – when we surrender ourselves fully to God. There's really only one exhortation in the book

of *Ecclesiastes* and that comes right at the end where Solomon writes, “*Fear God and keep his commandments*”. Through what Jesus has done for us and what his Holy Spirit can do within us, we have a completely new perspective on life. With his help we can look “*above the sun*” and see the God who controls our destiny, who can free us from the toil of seeing life as a burden. So let’s briefly look at what Peter has to say about it here.

1. A TOTAL TRANSFORMATION (1:3)

Paul, as we’ve said, talks about a “*new creation*”. Peter writes here of “*new birth*” and “*resurrection*”. They’re both words that speak of a whole new start, a completely new beginning. They are words of hope and of joy. What we are dealing with here is a complete transformation. Read through the New Testament and whether you’re looking at the words of Jesus himself or the writings of Paul or Peter or John or whoever, you’ll find the underlying talk is of transformation. As we listen to God, as we accept the reality of Jesus’ words and resolve to trust him for our life here and our eternal future, a change takes place in our lives that totally transforms us.

And that means not only a difference in our own lives that, we hope, other people can spot. It also means our outlook on life is changed as well. We see things, as it were, through a new lens. We look beyond the gloom and frustration of life “*under the sun*” to the amazing and radiant hope that God has for us “*above the sun*”. We start to see that this life is not all there is and that what we get out of this life is not completely reliant on our own efforts, our own strength – but reliant on the God for whom nothing is impossible.

2. THE TRANSIENCE OF THIS LIFE (vv4,6,7)

Peter makes it clear in these words that what we are going through here is not all there is. He talks about “*an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade*”. What God offers us is not the transient pleasures of this life, not the material stuff that so many of us want to build on, stuff that can deteriorate, can rot, can disappear, can lose its value overnight. We are offered something way beyond that. William Morrice, a New Testament scholar who wrote a whole book on the subject of joy, writes this in one of the chapters: “*Life in Christ and the hope of glory beyond this present world of time and space both bring the inward state of joy to the Christian.*”

Compared with the joy of eternity spent with God – and the firm belief in this life that we have it to look forward to – this current gloom is temporary, fleeting. Very few of us, although it may feel different now, ever have to go through life in complete, unrelieved, unalloyed gloom. We all have those moments of joy and peace. But what God offers us is a life where those proportions are reversed – where there is more joy than gloom (because, as human beings in this transient world, we will all have to put up with some gloom). And it is the offer from God that we need to consider. We have to accept that offer, to choose that joy. Henri Nouwen, an Ivy League academic who gave up a career that had taken him to both Yale and Harvard in order to live with and help those with disabilities, once wrote this:

“Joy does not simply happen to us. We have to choose joy and keep choosing it every day. It is a choice based on the knowledge that we belong to God and have found in God our refuge and our safety and that nothing, not even death, can take God away from us. Joy is the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing – sickness, failure, emotional distress, oppression, war, or even death – can take that love away”.

There is a security in that joy, because it comes from God, from God who loves us unconditionally, unendingly, unswervingly.

3. THE TRANSCENDENCE OF THIS JOY (vv8,9)

Because it comes from God, this joy, this counter to the gloom and frustration of this world is beyond anything we can really imagine. It is a joy which is transcendent. Peter has used the vocabulary of transformation in writing about this joy, but there is also the vocabulary of abundance. It is overflowing, prodigal. Leon Bloy writes that “*Joy is the most infallible sign of the presence of God*”. This amazing joy is such a counter to the cynicism, the gloom, the frustration of this world that it could only possibly come from something beyond this world, from God himself.

Look at vv8,9. Peter writes of “*an inexpressible and glorious joy*” and the way that he writes about it reflects that. It’s a strange sentence in Greek, like someone who can’t quite get the words out. If we translate it literally it goes something like this: “*You rejoice exceedingly with joy that is impossible to describe and full of the glory of heaven.*”. You remember those interviews with the athletes at the Olympic Games? They’ve just won a gold medal and the presenter asks them how they feel (stupid question!). They use words like “amazing”, “surreal”, “unbelievable”, “incredible”, “I can’t really describe it”. That’s what Peter is doing here – trying to give a feel of what this amazing, overwhelming joy really is.

It’s not just happiness. It’s not simply being upbeat about things. This joy is about a deep-seated sense of God’s presence, a peace that can cope with the problems, difficulties and tragedies that life throws at us. It’s a joy that helps us deal with all that going around us – because we can start to see it in its true perspective – and all that is going on within us – because we believe the God can help us through it. Samuel Shoemaker, an American clergyman who died in 1963, once said, “*The surest mark of a Christian is not faith, nor even love, but joy*”. If you’ve got that joy, it’s because you have faith already and it will be demonstrated in your loving attitudes to others. This joy is something that can never be imitated or put on – it’s a genuine gift of God, but he offers it to us all.

So, with Solomon, with Peter, with countless people of God down through the centuries, let us look up beyond the sun to something that really can be new for us. So often at this time of year in churches we refer to those passages in *Isaiah* which refer to God’s doing new things, verses such as *Isaiah 42:9*, “*See, the former things have taken place, and new things I declare; before they spring into being I announce them to you,*” and *Isaiah 43:18,19*, “*Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?*”

This morning, at the start of a new year, look for a new thing. Resolve to discover the joy that God can offer you. Do what Peter encourages his readers to do and “*believe*”. Allow him to transform your perspective. Move away from a fixation with this transient world. And be filled with the transcendent joy that comes only through a deep faith and trust in Jesus.

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Questions for discussion

1. Do you agree with Solomon that many people have a very gloomy outlook on life? Why do you think that is?
2. There is not much in *Ecclesiastes* that is positive, so why do you think it is included in The Bible?
3. What do you understand by "joy"?
4. What's the difference between joy and happiness?
5. How can we most effectively communicate the joy of being a follower of Jesus?