

Philippians | In the midst of suffering, joy

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Alison Sampson ~ Philippians 4:1-9

Someone called me the other day, a bit bothered because I don't always look happy. Indeed.

I'm deeply saddened by the deaths, the debilitation and the other losses which are happening at the church. I'm sickened by the current political climate, in which a billionaire's pet party offering nothing but fake news and hate looks to dominate the state election. I'm appalled by the Labor Government's approval of nearly 40 fossil fuel projects so far, and I fear the devastation this will wreak upon not only our Pacific neighbours but also upon ourselves. I'm weighed down by the interminable wars, by climate collapse, by species loss; I'm terrified at the prospect of a long hot bushfire summer. I despair at the wholesale adoption of the insidious and destructive technologies of AI, and I struggle to see what hope we have to offer our kids. So yes, it's true: Not happy, Jan!

I'm not always happy, because what's happening in the world affects me. I'm not always happy, because I love and care about people, I love and care for the church, and I love and care for the earth. It's not that I never feel happy, in fact very often I put on music and dance around my kitchen, or share a good meal or a belly laugh with friends. But to only laugh and celebrate when people are suffering and the world is burning is, quite simply, callous. When someone says, 'My heart is breaking,' or 'My people are in anguish,' or 'I can't afford my meds,' or 'My homeland will be washed away,' we don't go, 'Talk to the hand—because I'm happy!'

And yet, of course, some Christians effectively do this; they effectively ignore the cross. They seem to believe that, if their faith is strong enough, they'll always be happy, and nothing bad will ever happen to them. All their songs are cheerful or triumphant; there's no room for grief or lament. Then, when the teenager develops an eating disorder, the addiction takes over, or the marriage falls apart, they try to pretend these things aren't happening, or else they leave the church. Other insistently happy Christians will even accuse those who are sad, sick or suffering of having a lack of faith. We got a bit of that when my mother was ill; quite bluntly, it was spiritual abuse.

When people are suffering, the Bible doesn't tell them to buck up, she'll be right mate, get over it quicksticks. Instead, it tells us to weep with those who are weeping, and it gives us Psalms to lament. And when Jesus cries out in anguish from the cross, no voice from heaven tells him, 'Cheer up, son, it'll all be over in a minute.' Instead, the people who love him stand vigil to the end, as he hands his life, anguish and death into God's hands.

And yet the Apostle Paul writes, 'Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice!' Maybe those relentlessly happy Christians think he's telling us to walk around with a rictus grin and pretend everything's okay, but I don't think so. Paul's not writing from a sunny kitchen, or any other happy, cheerful or salubrious location. Instead, he's writing from a harsh prison in Rome where soon he will die. He's already endured hunger, persecution, shipwreck, whippings, beatings, and all the rest. He knows physical suffering. Even worse for him, the gospel message he shared so passionately has been undermined and even rejected by many. The faith communities he so lovingly established and so carefully instructed appear to be falling apart. His life and work look to be a complete failure, which will end in the shame of execution by the state.

Meanwhile, the church itself is about to go through terrible times under Emperor Nero. Christians will be used as burning torches in the Emperor's gardens; Christians will be thrown to the lions at the stadium. So Paul isn't happy and nor is the church; and much worse is still to come.

But 'Rejoice!' says Paul. 'Don't worry about anything.' Now, Paul is not naïve, and he's not a fool. He knows his life is nearing the end; he knows the church is falling apart; he knows Christians are being persecuted. He knows that God is not a superhero who will swoop down and magically fix everything. But he also knows something else: that nothing is wasted, nothing is lost, when placed in God's hands.

This is the mystery of the cross. It's the faith that pain, suffering and even death can be used for the salvation of the world. And it's the faith that when we trust God and allow God to use our lives, God can shape them for a greater purpose. Our troubles won't go away, but, in God's hands, they become part of a larger story in which suffering is in some way redeemed. It's the great cosmic project in which the world is being filled with God's goodness and healing and peace. In this larger story, we may or may not see results in our

lifetime, and we may or may not find happiness: but we will absolutely know joy.

Happiness? It's fleeting, temporary, context-dependent. And it's a matter of chance; indeed, the word is from the Middle English for 'luck.' Some people are lucky. They are born into enough love, money and opportunity. The society around them approves of their body, sexuality, and gender; their skin colour and ethnicity; their neurology and social class and everything else. They live in circumstances in which they can flourish; it's easy enough for them to feel happy.

Others are less lucky. There are things about them that aren't universally appreciated, accepted or understood, and often multiple things intersect in the same person. Poverty and queerness and disability and abuse, say, or being both Indigenous and autistic. They spend their lives on Struggle Street, braced against the next misunderstanding, the next hostility, the next rejection. Study after study after study shows that experiencing bias wherever you go, feeling constantly anxious about how you will be received, and being told in ways big and small that you are abnormal, disgusting or of little worth is terrible for your mental health. For such people, happiness becomes much more elusive.

So when you are free from fear, and free from care; when things are going well and the sun is shining and there's a bit of money in your pocket, it's easy enough to feel happy. But a bit less luck, or one record scratch moment, and it's over.

Joy is different. It's much bigger than happiness, and much more enduring. The Greek word is *chairō*; it means 'the culmination of being.' It's something we are promised in Christ, and it's a sign that all the parts of our lives have been brought together in God: the good, the bad, the ugly, the shameful, the painful, and everything else. Joy is what happens when we allow our whole selves to be integrated; joy is the sense of the fundamental interconnectedness of all things.

Joy, then, is not dependent on context or happenstance, nor does it indicate the absence of suffering. Instead, it's a gift we are given when we open our hearts to God, even or maybe especially in times of anguish. And when we seek God's will more than our own comfort or happiness, our suffering is written into a bigger story and we need no longer be afraid. Because when we give our lives to God, we can trust that the things that we are taught to

fear—suffering, rejection, anguish, even death—will be redeemed. ‘Don’t worry about anything,’ writes Paul: not because our troubles will evaporate, but because uniting with God brings purpose and joy, and joy is the antidote to fear. So joy doesn’t mean the rain has stopped. It means we are sustained in the rain.

And joy is the feeling I get when I take part in nonviolent action, knowing the activity itself seems futile, and yet it has heavenly power. Joy is the gift I receive when I join with others in prayer or song, and experience a powerful sense of connection. Joy is what I know when I stop doom scrolling and instead contemplate what is good and right and true in this world, all that is beautiful and life-giving.

Joy is the strength which flows through Country and is shared with those who seek it. And joy is the inkling I had on the day my mother died. For, in the midst of our desperate grief and terror, as we committed her to God, there was a presence beyond us, beyond suffering. As impossible as it seems, on that dark and dreadful day I sensed the undergirding power, the flowing and fullness, the great shining reality of joy: and I knew that we would somehow endure.

So in these days of terror and sadness, in this time of myriad personal and public griefs, in response to the wounds of the earth and the destruction of a stable climate and the cries from Palestine and Ukraine and Nepal and everywhere else, I urge you to turn, turn, turn again to God.

‘Pray about everything,’ encouraged a man who knew suffering. ‘Tell God what you need. Thank God for what God has done.’ Place every aspect of your lives into God’s hands, and trust that God will use it all for the healing of the world. And then, writes Paul, ‘God’s peace, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.’

Your troubles will not go away: but you will know peace. Your suffering will still be with you: but you will know courage. Your body will still ache with terrible grief: but bubbling below the surface in a never-ending stream, you will know the presence and power of joy. Thanks be to God, source of all life, all hope, all joy: Amen. Ω