

Throughout this year our theme has been “Becoming like Christ”. Our aim has been to help you imagine Christ as the most glorious and multi faceted diamond ever known and each week we have been looking at one of those facets, one of those aspects, of Christ which will help us become like him. Today we are looking at Christ by rejoicing.

We normally understand the word rejoice today as meaning something which happens inside people; a sense of joy welling up inside which explodes outwardly in a visible and sometimes audible expression of sheer delight; of exuberant celebration.

PP1 3 weeks ago there was rejoicing in this church at young Theo’s baptism

PP2 1966 – I was there that day; north stand row K; actually sitting next to Henry Cooper – a boxing star of the day for those of you under 45 who haven’t heard of him – I was so ecstatic at the result I couldn’t sleep for two nights through excitement.

PP3 2011 – I was there that day too; centre stage not row K and I’m still rejoicing every single day – [that’s

PP4 2017 – Last month – doesn’t that show great joy and sheer delight?

Adam is the one on the right. He was 3 in March and we’re trying to teach him noughts and crosses. He said “Grandpa, you can be noughts and I’ll be the winner” I’m not quite sure he’s got it yet, but he’s certainly got rejoicing down to a fine art already because when he got three crosses in a row – POW!

Yet back in the first century world and culture of Jesus and Paul, rejoicing would more akin to what we understand as a public celebration. Throughout the Roman world, not just in places such as Ephesus, Corinth and Philippi, the civic leaders used to organize great festivals and games to celebrate their cities and their gods, not least the new ‘god’, Caesar himself.

The celebration was designed to encourage and strengthen loyalty and obedience to Caesar. Here Paul is saying ‘why shouldn’t we as followers of King Jesus celebrate exuberantly too?’

Verse 4 “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice”.

Show joy in our celebration urges Paul.

We often use the words joy and happiness pretty much as synonyms, but there are times when it is important to make a distinction. Happiness is primarily an outward emotional reaction to pleasant circumstances we might find ourselves in, but joy is a deep, inner characteristic – indeed a fruit of the spirit – that continues to exist even in unpleasant circumstances and in fact helps to sustain us through those bad times.

And that is evident here in Paul’s circumstances. Remember, this letter was written by Paul when he was imprisoned; facing huge difficulties and hardship; the reality of execution was ever present.

Yet these words ring clear with the jubilant exhortation that we should rejoice in the Lord. The phrase ‘the Lord’ here does not mean God the Father, but Jesus Christ. Rejoice in Jesus Christ because that is the key to being blessed, that ultimate bestowal of divine favour.

Rejoice in the Lord always....always means all day every day, not just now and again. We can do so always because Christ is always the same; he never changes. Christ’s grace is not only constant but also always sufficient, hallmarked by the eternal strands of peace and pardon.

We speak of Christ who was and is and is to come; an unchanging sameness, if you like.

If the goal of a Christian is to aim to become like Christ, and this sermon series is trying to point us in the right direction – then we should remember that joy is proclaimed throughout the New Testament:

1. At Jesus’ birth the angel says “I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people”

2. In Jesus' ministry as he rode triumphantly into Jerusalem Luke tells us "the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully"

3. And at his resurrection Matthew tells us the two Marys "ran from the tomb with great joy to tell the disciples"

But as we all know, we live in a fallen, imperfect, sinful world. Bad things happen; evil exists. And Paul knew this. Paul's not trying to tell us that following Christ will make every challenge go away or make our daily life easier.

Paul knew full well about the dark side of life; physical violence; religious persecution; racial discrimination; hunger and sudden tragic deaths of people he loved and cared for. Paul had many reasons in fact, not to rejoice.

But Paul understood that while the world is fallen and imperfect; there's a God who will not rest until he restores it back to perfection – the way He meant it to be. He found reason to rejoice despite everything he had to endure because he knew and understood the truth of the words when Jesus said:

"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die"

Those words of promise are at the heart of every funeral service I take and why just as joy is at the heart of the gospel narrative, joy permeates through our own lives; through the joy of baptism; the joy of the wedding ceremony and contrary to what many might think; the joy of a funeral where for the true believers in Christ it is a time to rejoice in the Lord.

When I was writing this I stopped and reflected at this point. When I rejoice in the Lord do I show great joy and sheer delight? If singing hymns and songs passionately....ok when singing hymns and songs loudly....do I show and feel great joy.

Yes, I think so. Does the fact that that I often sing off key matter? Yes, to the people near me I suppose. But would the Lord worry or be concerned? No, I don't think so because I believe my rejoicing is sincere and heartfelt; my singing is a manifestation of my passion for Christ, I am not singing out of a sense of duty.

So let me ask the question of you. Do you sing as a way of rejoicing in the Lord or out of sense of duty? Do you proclaim Christ in song or do you mumble in embarrassment? Answers on a postcard, please.

Interestingly, Paul immediately juxtaposes rejoicing in the Lord with a need to be and to be seen as gentle. Verse 5 "Let your gentleness be known to everyone".

The Roman games and festivals were often the scene of over exuberant celebration which spilt over into angry and sometimes violent behaviour between and towards some people; sadly something which is still experienced two thousand years on in our own culture.

Paul sets the standard expected of Christ's followers. The public image of the Christian church should be that of a gentle, gracious community. Yes, rejoice but don't go over the top as others do. Stand out. Be different.

Once again I stopped and reflected. Am I gentle? When I get passionate about something do I insist on my own position being right; am I willing to show moderation or patience?

Am I ready to concede a point; to persuade by gentle discussion, not by angry "my way or the highway" argument.

I thought long and hard on this and decided that most of the time I would be seen as patient and willing to engage in gentle discussion. But sadly I also decided that there were occasions when I was insistent that black was white and I was right.

So to any individual here, if I have been insistent that black was white and grey was not a middle ground I was prepared to venture into – then I apologise. I am sorry. My only excuse is that you can take the boy out of Cleethorpes but you can't take Cleethorpes out of the boy.

And let me ask that same question of you as individuals. Do you live as Paul says we should? Are you gentle and gracious in all you do?

And what about us as a church family? Are we a gracious and gentle community? Do we resolve our differences through confrontation or conciliation? Are we tolerant of others who hold different opinions and points of view to ourselves?

I'm asking these question now because as sure as night follows day, these are the sort of questions that will be in Jon's mind when he comes next month and if the answer to any or all of those questions are anything but a high fiving yes, then I think each and everyone one of us needs to stop, think, pray and where appropriate repent and resolve to change.

Because, rejoicing always in the Lord is not an optional feature of becoming like Christ; it is compulsory.

At all times and in all circumstances Paul is telling us to rejoice. In the midst of sorrow, fear or anxiety we can still rejoice because it is a source of consolation. And when times are good, cultivating a real joy, rejoicing in the Lord, can keep us centred on what it means to be a follower of Christ.

I've finished, so definitely a time to rejoice!

Rejoice, I say, again, Rejoice.

Amen