
Talk by John Matthews 12th October 2014 Puy de Serre Holy Communion

Matthew 22: 1-14 Philippians 4:1-9 Exodus 32: 1-14

During this past week, outside certain kosher restaurants and in the gardens of some observant Jews, makeshift tents have been erected. Traditionally, these structures were covered with leaves, but now they may consist of hessian draped over a bamboo frame or, more likely, be one of the pre-fabricated sets that can be bought on-line. They are there to mark the seven day Festival of Tabernacles (or Sukkot), which began on Wednesday.

The seven day period is known by Jews as 'the season of our joy', and they seek to share that joy by entertaining guests - but before entering their temporary tabernacles they also pray that bread be provided for the hungry. In this spirit, this year at St. James Church in Piccadilly, Jews and Christians are celebrating together a joint Sukkot and Harvest Festival, and operating a soup kitchen each night.

The biblical instruction, via Moses, 'to dwell in booths' for seven days occurs in Leviticus 23:verse 42, and commemorates the temporary shelters which housed the Israelites in their 40 years in the wilderness, following their exodus from slavery in Egypt.

In recalling these wilderness years, the makeshift shelters, or sukkahs, symbolise **trust** in divine providence and protection, particularly when life can seem uncertain and insecure. But they also symbolise **joy** at God's transformation of the lives of Israel as a nation and of each individual brought safely back from exile.

So after all these years, Jews remember with gratitude God's love and concern at a crucial period in their history.. I wonder how often you and I **consciously** do that! Many good things happen to us, but don't we quickly forget them when things go wrong. Recalling them helps us to get life back in proportion, and gives us courage during the more difficult times.

In our reading from Philippians, two women, Euodia and Syntyche, are in dispute. Paul, while not specifying what the problem was, is concerned. Many people had come to faith through these women bringing them the good news of Jesus, and Paul asks them to settle their disagreement and carry on together with their work. He also asks the other Church members to help them sort things out.

Let's remember that at this point Paul is in prison. His attitude reminds us that our inner feelings do not have to reflect our outward circumstances. He was filled with joy, because he knew that whatever happened to him, Jesus Christ was with him. Its easy to get discouraged about unpleasant circumstances or to take unimportant évents too seriously. But Paul tells us 'Rejoice in the Lord always -and again I say, 'Rejoice'.

And what could be more joyful than the wedding banquet, usually one of the most enjoyable of family parties, in the parable reported in our Gospel reading?

However, in this parable, the invitations had been sent out but everyone started

coming up with excuses for not going, so the host is bitterly disappointed and decides to invite anyone in the vicinity to come in. 'Go, therefore, into the streets and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet'. Jesus wants us to realise that heaven is like such a banquet, to which everyone is invited. What saddens God is that not everyone accepts his invitation.

As with the people in the parable, who cited their need to attend to their farm, their business etc., the excuses we make, or which we meet from others, are not necessarily bad in themselves.

But many of us allow the attraction of earthly things to distract us from the heavenly - we spend a lot of time on passing fancies rather than on that which is eternal.

Those in the parable who were in the highways and byways had no **right** to an invitation. What we see is God's grace and goodness at work, as he welcomes us all to enjoy his presence and to feast on all he offers us.

Of course, when **we** approach people, many will say, when we mention Church or Jesus, 'But we're not religious'. Whether they realise it or not, religion is the principles by which they live and the priorities they have chosen. So, whether they choose to get rich quick or to follow their conscience, one way or another they are following a religion. What they often **mean** is that the Christians **they** know appear to be some kind of 'Holy Joes', detached from the real world. So we must try to disabuse them of this notion.

The Church should be a foretaste of heaven, and Church services a bit like Christ's family party. But if people are turning down **our** invitations, do we then need to make those invitations clearer? Are our services welcoming and joyful, so that those who come for the first time are keen to return? Do our friends see us as full of joy, or as simply avoiding some areas of conversation, some situations, or grimacing at their sometimes colourful language?

When we talk about Church in the presence of others, do we present a positive picture of our life together as the family of God- or do we discuss what we dislike about it, or about some of our fellow worshippers? Do we befriend people and show a real interest in their needs, or seek to 'tick the box' by filling another seat in our worship centre.

Surely we can talk about how being part of the Church helps us in our own lives and, above all, explain that God shows no partiality. His perpetual love is for everyone. The Bible tells us that if we trust Jesus, God has promised us eternal life. To trust him, we have to **know** Jesus and **talk** to him often. Church is here to make that easier. Whether that's the Church **building** where we make newcomers welcome, or **us** as members of the Body of Christ, getting alongside people to help them identify their real needs.

Our own lives may seem very difficult at times, when we cannot see a way through. The Israelites had been slaves in Egypt for many years and the future looked bleak, till God intervened. Many Jews will today be in their makeshift tents in joyful remembrance.

Paul, languishing in prison, finds the strength to encourage the Church in Philippi to stand firm in the Lord, to rejoice, not to worry, but to think only of those things which are just, pure, or commendable. And to let their gentleness be known to everyone.

But we have to work at putting into our minds all the positive things in God's world. Every day, the media face us with so many negative images. If we simply go with the flow, we'll have a negative view of everything. Remember instead who it was brought the Israelites out of Egypt, who it was who inspired Paul to rejoice even in prison, then fast forward to how God has intervened in our own lives recently.

Let's learn from history. God is faithful. Having given mankind every opportunity to repent of its waywardness, he sends his only Son to die for us and to point our way to eternal life through his resurrection. When, through Christ, God invites us to the feast, he means it and will be delighted if we take up his invitation. We'll be sharing Holy Communion in a few minutes, a thanksgiving. Let's then go on our way rejoicing, and may **our joy** be infectious.