The Joy of Life in Christ

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 28 April 2024

Acts 8:26-40 • 1 John 4:7-12,19-21 • John 15:1-8



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

Our readings today cover a range of important truths:

- God is love
- Jesus lives in us, and we in Jesus
- We should receive God's love with joy and excitement

Let's start with the last. The passage from Acts about Philip and the Ethiopian official is one of my all-time favourites. I chose it for my induction into my first parish, another St Mary's, in Timaru. It shows us a man, the Ethiopian, who hungers for God's word. He is sitting in his carriage (he is a high official in Ethiopia) reading from the Book of Isaiah. But he doesn't fully understand

it. He is reading a passage which speaks about Jesus Christ. He wants to understand — he knows that this is important. God is calling him to respond, and he wants to with all his heart. When Philip appears and begins to explain it all to him, all about Jesus and his death and resurrection, he grows even more excited. When they pass by a pond or perhaps it's a river, he says to Philip, "Here is some water. What is to keep me from being baptised?" Well, nothing is keeping him, and Philip baptises him on the spot. Afterwards, he goes away, rejoicing. It is not exactly spelled out, but it looks like he has received the Holy Spirit. He is now a child of God, and it fills him with joy.

And so should we all receive the Spirit with joy. For what gift could be better? What could be better than to become united with the Spirit, which is God? Sometimes I think we forget about the joy of being Christians. Our God loves us and wants us to be happy in the world he created for us. All our daily troubles and worries — what do they amount to, in comparison to the great gift of life in Christ?

For we are in Christ, as today's Gospel reminds us. Jesus is the vine, and we are the branches. What does this image mean for us? First, it is clear that we are connected to Christ. If we put our faith in Christ, we are not separate beings. We cannot be — just as a branch can't live once it is separated from the vine. The life of any plant flows up its vine, or trunk, or stem, and then into the branches. So our life flows through Jesus into us. We have no life apart from Jesus.

Jesus speaks of the fruit we will bear, if we remain united to him. What is that fruit? Paul speaks of the fruit of the spirit: "The Spirit produces love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility, and self-control." Above all, though, the fruit which we are to bear is faith. We know that the one thing we need in order to remain in Christ is faith. If we do not have faith, we have no part of Jesus, and we will fall away, as a dead branch falls from the vine. If we do not have faith, we do not have Christ in us, and we are not in Christ. In turn, there is a fruit of faith: good deeds. Remember what James says about faith and actions:

> My friends, what good is it for one of you to say that you have faith if your actions do not prove it? Can that faith save you? Suppose there are brothers or sisters who need clothes and don't have enough to eat. What good is there in your saying to them, "God bless you! Keep warm and eat well!"—if you don't give them the necessities of life? So it is with faith: if it is alone and includes no actions, then it is dead. (James 2:14-17)

Faith without actions is dead. Jesus looks for us to produce fruit, and our fruit, as branches on Jesus the vine, is faith, and our faith produces the fruit of good works. But do not imagine that good works alone are sufficient. First, we have

faith; then we are inspired and guided by the Holy Spirit to do the good works. This is a great example of how God works: God wants us to serve him, and also gives us the strength, opportunity and desire to serve him. This all flows from our faith, which connects us through Jesus to God.

And God does this because God loves us. We come around full circle to the joy I spoke of at the beginning. God loves us, and as John puts it, we love because God loves us (1 John 4:19). We should never forget this: God loves us. God is love, for all love comes from God. And in turn, we love others because God first loved us. If we do not love others, we are breaking trust with God and betraying our duty in God's world.

One final note: Philip, in our story from Acts, is a great role model for us, because when he was asked to help the Ethiopian official to understand the Scriptures, he immediately did so. With patience and love "he told him the Good News about Jesus" (Acts 8:35). All of us should be ready to tell another person about the love of God and what Jesus did for us on the cross. We don't need to be Bible experts or professors in theology; all we need is to speak from our hearts about the love our God showers on us. We need to be able to tell another about the sacrifice Jesus made, and the promise he made us of eternal life with him. If we are fortunate enough to meet up with a student as willing to learn as the Ethiopian was, it will be easy. But even if not, no matter what reception we get, we still must tell how God's love entered our lives and continues to sustain us. If for no other reason, it is too good not to share! The story of Jesus' sacrifice is truly Good News, and we give thanks to our Father in heaven for all he is and does. In the name of our Lord Jesus. Amen.