

# CHRIST THE PATTERN OF OUR JOY

By WILLIAM YEOMANS

Joy is as much a distinctive mark of the true follower of Christ as charity. For the Spirit of love, who gathers together in Christ the children of God, is also the Spirit of joy. Through him Christ gives to his Church the joy which no man can take away. In the Spirit the Church proclaims the message of Christ, the glad tidings of the Gospel, the best news that ever uplifted the heart of man. As long as the Spirit of holiness, of love and of joy is one and the same there will never be a glum saint. Some saints may have lacked humour, but none of them have been without joy. We debase joy by thinking of it merely in terms of enjoyment, pleasure, or cheerfulness. These can indeed be part of joy but they are none of them the fullness of joy. We treat joy merely as a desirable experience whereas it is an emotion in the etymological sense of the word, a powerful motive force which instigates and sustains vital action. As such, joy is a gift inherent in our nature, an imperishable force which leads us back to its Author, God.

He who fashioned our nature, taking a divine pride in the work of his hands, refashions it through the work of the Spirit. Grace does not dispense with or eliminate our human nature, it renews, reforms, restores and enhances what God still sees to be good. So, when St. Paul enumerates the results of the working of the Spirit<sup>1</sup> within us, he is not making a list of extraordinary gifts given only to the few. Joy, peace and love are an integral part of the Christian life. It is normal and to be expected that those who are growing in Christ, under the action of the Spirit, should increase in joy and love and peace. Furthermore, these 'fruits of the Spirit' are not less visible and less perceptible because they are interior. Spiritual joy is an interior transformation which manifests itself in an exterior attitude. The Sunday face of the Christian should not be a false mask of simulated seriousness, but should rather shine with the joy of the Resur-

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<sup>1</sup> Gal 5,22.

rection which that day commemorates. 'Rejoicing always' is not a work of supererogation, but the habitual attitude of all who have been re-born in Christ.

But, in all honesty, many of us have to admit that Christian joy is not nearly as tangible or even as attractive a reality in our lives as we are told it should be. It is difficult in practical life to treat what are termed 'worldly joys' as if they were vain, empty, and worthless. So often they are the only relief from the hectic monotony of daily life. Spiritual joy may be sublime but it seems to thrive only in a rarefied atmosphere from which the warmth of human joy has been extracted. And in our heart of hearts we are perhaps relieved to remain on the lower slopes of the seven storey mountain. Consequently we respond to the Church's call to joy at Paschal time by fabricating our own enjoyment. But the Christ of Easter morning is the radiant, triumphant Saviour of the world. His joy is not something separate from himself, nor is it something which he keeps to himself. He rises from death for us and He it is who is our joy. We cannot refuse his joy without rejecting him. For his own joy consists in loving us and in having us for his reward, as he sees the transformation which our acceptance of his love works in us. We are inevitably possessed by his joy, in so far as we allow his love to take possession of our hearts. The selfishness which limits our capacity for receiving Christ's love limits also our capacity for true joy. Christ himself promised that our joy should be full and permanent; but on the understanding that we receive him and his love, as he receives us and our love, with longing and without compromise.

However, joy cannot be switched on suddenly like a lamp, nor can we change our emotions as the chameleon changes colour. The Church knows this well and has given us the means of disposing our hearts to receive the joy and consolation of Christ. That preparation has been the austerity of Lent. If Lenten penance means to seek Christ by renouncing self-seeking, then the product of penance must be to find Christ's joy. It is true, of course, that the smoker is glad to light his pipe again, the child to relish once again his sweets. And indeed, these minor joys are tiny reflections of the ineffable joy of Christ risen, and they follow self-denial as the Resurrection follows Calvary. As long as Christ's spirit quickens our small austerities we shall be able to discover the deeper and fuller Christian joy. Christ explains this through the metaphor of the woman who gives birth to a child. Once the child is born she 'does not remember the distress any longer, so glad is she that a man has been born into the

world'.<sup>1</sup> There are no regrets about the long months of waiting, the irksome inconvenience, the final climax of pain. Her joy in her baby banishes any such sterile thoughts. Her labour is revealed not as the negation nor as the absence of joy, but as the way to joy caused by the same joyful presence she holds at her breast. So too, the joy of the Resurrection comes not merely after the sorrowful death on the cross, but through it and because of it. There is here no discontinuity between sorrow and joy since they are woven into the one pattern of the life of Christ. Risen and glorious he still bears the marks of suffering in his wounds, but the source of pain and suffering is now a glad sign of triumph. Christ is no longer sorrowful, not because he has escaped from sorrow, but because he has overcome it. By going courageously into the very depths of sorrow he has attained the summit of joy. The intensity of his sorrow, its utter selflessness, was the dark and constricting womb in which joy was conceived. After his Resurrection he can look with serenity on his time of sorrow and show others how necessary it was. We who would share the joy of Christ must first of all learn to share without regret in his passion and death. We rise with him in the measure in which we understand the necessity of his death.

Not that Christ will refuse his joy to those who have run away fearfully from his sufferings. He who came to seek and save what was lost was quick to pursue the two along the road to Emmaus. Our Lord does not deal with us according to our merits, nor do we have to demand our rights from him. Love knows no accountancy. Christ seeks to give us his joy in its fullness but he can only give to each according to his capacity, for he forces himself on no one. His love will make light of past failure, it will excuse cowardice and desertion; but it is blocked by that inner hardening of the heart which comes from self-justification.

Lent is indeed a preparation for joy, but joy itself is the motive force which leads us to enter with good heart into the austerities of making ourselves ready to receive Christ. The gladness which Christ wishes to see on the face of his followers who fast is not feigned. The 'Rejoice Jerusalem' of the Fourth Sunday in Lent is not an isolated cry in a wilderness of penance, but the bursting forth of an emotion which is ever present, though concealed. Christ himself made a point of emphasising that joy must be the motive force behind any

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<sup>1</sup> Jn 16,21.

sort of renunciation made for his sake. In the parable of the treasure hidden in the field<sup>1</sup> the whole point of the story is that the finder is so overwhelmingly glad at his find, he is so exultant that he sells all he has in order to buy the field. The selling of his possessions even to the very last one is a natural consequence of his joy. It is the obvious thing to do. In other words the discovery of the Kingdom of God inspires such joy that penance, austerity, renunciation seem not only worthwhile but normal. Joy leads to sacrifice and puts penance into its true perspective as a means to an end.

St. Paul echoes this message when, in a letter which has joy as a theme, he says that for the privilege of the love of Christ he is ready to treat everything else as refuse.<sup>2</sup> What is more, he wrote those words whilst he was in prison under the shadow of a death sentence. He is not denying that other things have their value. But his conviction is firm that the only absolute value in his life is the love of Christ and before that everything else is expendable. Paul could face death without fear because he saw beyond death the infinite joy which had already taken possession of his soul.

Before Paul, St. John the Baptist was seized with joy at the sound of the Bridegroom's voice. The presence of Christ was for him the fulfilment of the joy which had made him leap in his mother's womb at the glad news of the coming of the Saviour. The austerity of John was inspired by that first taste of divine joy. His voice was not the voice of doom but a sound of gladness breaking through the grim silence of the desert. What difference did a hard life and rough fare make to one who knew that the Messiah, for whom Israel yearned, was near at hand. The glimpse of a joyful dawn made the long night's waiting seem worthwhile. Once he has seen Christ and his joy is fulfilled John is led to say 'He must become more and more, I must become less and less'.<sup>3</sup> He is so glad that now he can think of only one thing to do: to stand aside in joy before the one whose way he had prepared in joy. The recognition others tried to give him meant nothing to John: 'He said I am not the Christ'.<sup>4</sup> His joy was to recognise Christ.

The Presence of Christ inevitably brings joy to those who believe in him and long for him. The moment of his conception brought to Mary the exultant gladness which finds expression in the Magnificat. Hungry for God, refusing to see herself as more than his handmaid, her selflessness was the measure of her capacity for joy. And when

<sup>1</sup> Mt 13,44.<sup>2</sup> Phil 3,8.<sup>3</sup> Jn 3,30.<sup>4</sup> Jn 1,20.

she brought forth her son she rejoiced, not merely as might any mother who gives a son to the world, but with the joy of God giving himself through her to the world. Her human joy was not excluded but rather intensified beyond all measure by the graceful presence of her child.

The foundation, then, of Christian joy is the discovery and recognition of Christ amongst us, and the knowledge that he brings us salvation. Hence the Church's prayer that 'we may find unending joy through the Easter liturgy, so that the unceasing working-out of our redemption may cause us everlasting joy'.<sup>1</sup> Christ is with us, the glorious conqueror of our mortal enemies sin and death. His victory is ours. In him we are assured of our salvation. We can watch him at Emmaus putting a new and burning heart into those who had lost courage, and know that he is seeking to replace our diffidence by his powerful hope. In the supper room, as Christ changes Thomas' doubt into ardent faith, we know that he is helping us towards that same act of faith: 'My Lord and my God'. By the lakeside in Galilee, the God of love fulfils his promise to Peter despite his previous betrayal. It is the same God who is at work transforming our inconstant, over-emotional attachment to him into the love that is stronger than death. As we see Christ giving his disciples power to forgive sins, we know that we live in a time of mercy and pardon. Judgement will come, but as long as we draw breath we know that the forgiving arms of God are ever ready to receive us. Hope, confidence, joy, all these are within our grasp as we fix our gaze upon him who is the source of our confidence and our hope of glory.

There is a passage in the Gospels which shows that Christ would have us establish our joy upon the firm hope of eternal happiness. When the Apostles returned from their preaching expedition 'full of rejoicing' they went to Christ: 'Lord, they said, even the demons are subject to us in your name'.<sup>2</sup> They are exultant in finding that, whereas they had been sent only to preach, even greater power had been given them. What does Christ do? He does not reprove their high spirits and warn them about 'spiritual pride'. He shows them first of all that he shares in their joy. 'I was watching Satan; he fell like a lightning-flash from heaven'.<sup>3</sup> But he goes on and teaches them to keep the joy they have in their victory over Satan by giving it a firmer foundation: 'Nevertheless, let not the submission of spirits be

<sup>1</sup> Saturday of Easter week: Secret.

<sup>2</sup> Lk 10,17ff.

<sup>3</sup> Lk 10,18: a verse often mistranslated, cf. tenses of the two verbs in Greek.

the source of your joy, but rather this: that your names are enrolled in heaven'. Christ would have them rejoice but does not want their joy to depend upon a passing success, a moment of triumph. It is rather to be rooted in the joy of God, his delight in those whom he has chosen. This is the joy of Christ himself. 'At that very hour Jesus was filled with the joy of the Holy Spirit and said: I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth because you have hidden these things from the wise and the shrewd and revealed them to the simple, yes, Father, I thank you because this has been your good pleasure'.

Gladness fills the heart of Christ at the manifest working of the mystery of salvation in their lives. In them he recognises his Father at work and rejoices with him. The mutual, loving, recognition of Father and Son in the Spirit envelopes through Christ the whole human race. In the Church, who lives by the Spirit, the Father rejoices as he recognises us as sons, in the Son. We in our turn can recognise in Christ and in each other the work of the Father, and cry out to him in joy: 'Abba'. This joy he communicates to them and to us. 'What else is the joy of Christ in us but that he has deigned to rejoice over us. And what else is our joy which he tells us is to be fulfilled, but our companionship with him'.<sup>1</sup> Christ rejoices over us because he looks on us as the community of those whom he has saved and whom he invites to the eternal banquet of heaven. We hope for heaven by his gift, and by his gift we rejoice in that hope. Joy awaits us, and the prospect of joy cannot but bring joy to our hearts. It is true that we have not yet reached the final goal. Our full resurrection is to come. But our life can be a continual working nearer to that glad consummation. 'Not that I have already reached fulfilment. I only press on in hope of winning the mastery, as Christ Jesus has won mastery over me . . . forgetting what I have left behind, intent on what lies before me, I press on with the goal in view, eager for the prize of being called by God into heaven through Christ Jesus'.<sup>2</sup>

The Christian life is a road towards joy, and it is normal that, as we go along, our hearts should be gladdened by the thought of what awaits us. But even more than that: we know that the Lord into whose joy we are to enter is here and now our joyful companion. The transformation worked in us by the glory of God will make us capable of recognising face to face him whom we discern now dimly

<sup>1</sup> Phil 3,12-14.

<sup>2</sup> PL 79,567B.

as in a mirror. We know that we are God's children even though we may not be able to recognise ourselves. But when we look in faith at Christ glorious and radiantly joyful we know that we shall be like when he appears. His joyful recognition of us, 'Come ye blessed of my Father', will enable us to recognise him with the same joy. In the meantime we are moving towards that fulfilment when we shall rejoice over everything in the one divine joy of the Trinity. The Christian ideal is not the renunciation of all joy on earth in favour of a happiness to be attained only after death. It is rather the attempt to rejoice always on earth as we shall rejoice for ever in heaven. It is seeing in every authentic joy on this earth a reflection of the divine joy which awaits us. The Christian sets his heart on the joy of God and rejoices over whatever is a genuine manifestation of that joy on earth. The Apostles were certainly delighted with their great catch of fish by the lake of Tiberias. Did not St. John remember the exact number years later? And did Christ stand unmoved whilst they were counting them? Rejoicing with Christ, what else could their joy be but spiritual?

It is not only normal but essential that we find in God's world some trace of the creative joy which brought it into being. It is essential that our hearts be gladdened by beauty, that we know the joy of love and friendship, that we rejoice over work well done, over the good fortune of others. But it is equally essential that such rejoicing lead us back to the source of joy. The Church bids us rejoice in Christ's triumph not just because we share in it but because it is *his* triumph in which we share. We are to forget our small miseries by being glad for him. This joy can be constant in our lives. For wherever Christ is triumphing, wherever there is joy over one sinner who repents, we too can rejoice. Our successes in the Kingdom of God are all for Christ. There is no need for envy where we all share in the triumphs of each other.

When St. Gregory writes, 'Those who do not love God with their whole heart are incapable of rejoicing in him whilst they find their pleasure in the things of the world',<sup>1</sup> his doctrine may seem too austere for ordinary Christians. But St. Gregory is only stating in all his honesty what we are loath to admit. Fundamentally we are afraid of loving God with our whole hearts lest we lose the love of other things. We are afraid lest by rejoicing in God we should become incapable of appreciating all other joys. So we either conten-

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<sup>1</sup> PL 79, 567B.

tedly limit our spiritual horizons and build a false humility on the principle that God has not and does not intend to give us the grace to become really holy. Or we take our pleasures and relaxation with an uneasy and guilty feeling that there is something wrong with them, and make sporadic attempts to forswear them. Such fear cramps the soul and shrivels our capacity for God's consoling love.

But the effect of grace, of the sanctifying work of the Trinity within us, is not to make us less human. Christian asceticism is not directed towards the transformation of man into a disembodied spirit. God works to bring his creature, man, to his true fulfilment, which is not the separation of spirit from matter, the freeing of the soul from the body, but the perfect unity and harmony of soul and body. It is sin which divides soul and body, setting them against each other. It is sin which would have the instincts of the body run riot and sap the strength of the soul. It is sin which would regard the body as evil and make of religion a form of escapism from the world God created. Before the risen Christ we can face the truth. True God and true man, the glory of the divinity shines forth in his humanity, his body can express the glory of the Only-Begotten, it has become the eloquent gesture of his soul. If we are to take our joy with Christ we must learn to school our bodies so that they express the joy of the Spirit. Material joys must become the means to and the expression of spiritual joy, instead of being distractions and diversions.

Such an ideal leads us to follow Christ not merely in his Resurrection but in the Ascension. It takes us beyond this world and this life into eternity where it will find achievement. That should not dismay but rather encourage us. Any ideal which stops short of God is unworthy of man. Christian living is not a part-time hobby but the work of a life-time. We pray with the Church that 'in the midst of a changing world our hearts may be fixed where are the true joys'. We live out that prayer by seeking in the Spirit, Christ the joyful. In order to do this it will be necessary to wean our hearts from their instinctive attachment to material joys. We must die to that urge to possess which the attraction of material joy arouses. But this death must be accompanied by an entry into the joy of the Lord. The desire to have must be replaced by the desire to give. Christ gives us his joy so that we may share it with others. The Christian does not rejoice because he has something which others lack, but because he has something to give to those who have less. Hence Christian joy is a force which builds up the community of the Church. It leads



the individual to seek out with Christ those who mourn in order to give them the comfort of his message. Paradoxically joy leads the Christian to share in the sorrows of others, to bear their burdens with them and even instead of them, in order to help them share in the joy of Christ. It is selfless enough to take delight in the success of others and forget its own failures in the joy of another's triumph. Christ did not want his disciples to grow bitter over their own cowardice but to rejoice in his triumph. He directed their gaze to what lay ahead. The future was to bring them trouble enough; suffering and martyrdom were their lot, but they learnt from him to rejoice in their troubles. In Christ suffering is no longer pointless and without meaning; it is a means to redemption.

Because the joy of the Spirit is the eternal joy of God, Christian joy bears the stamp of permanence. Joy can always be a constant value in our lives even though at times we may not sensibly experience it. Its continual presence should give a stability and steadiness to our work. It should ensure the unwavering co-ordination of all the forces of our character in any enterprise. For when the going is difficult we shall not first of all turn to seek elsewhere a compensating consolation in an attempt to forget our difficulties. We shall seek first of all the strength of Christ, 'the joy of God is our strength'.<sup>1</sup> This is the strength which enables us to face difficulties without losing our peace of soul. Firmly founded on the joy of Christ, we shall be able to take necessary relaxation not in a spirit of escapism but with Christ. Our human enjoyment will not be a separate and more comfortable compartment in our lives. It will be part of the one pattern of Christian joy which bears witness on earth to the glory of the Risen Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> Neh 8, 10.