

Prayer

Giver of joy, God who is father and mother to us, we praise you.

Embodiment of joy, God who is Christ to us, we praise you.

Fountain of joy, God who is Holy Spirit, we praise you.

Three person-ed God, in all, among all and beyond all, we praise you.

In every person there is a centre, for you, from which you form us,

And from that centre, from you, love flows and joy abides.

We confess we try to fill that centre with other than you,

closing ourselves off to your life, shutting down what you seek to open,

restraining what you seek to release. Forgive us we pray. Restore us in your love.

Awaken us to your presence. Prepare us for your joy. Come to us with all your life revealed in Jesus Christ, through whom we pray.

“Prepared for joy” a sermon based on Matthew 25:1-13 preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright on 12 November 2017.

The scene is an airport welcoming area, the area where people emerge through doors from the secure space. A barrier keeps the waiting crowd at bay. This day a young woman was waiting there, evidently full of anticipation. She was on hot bricks. As close as you could get to the welcoming door, leaning across the crowd barrier, to which she had gradually worked her way, pressing through the gaps. She was looking intently as each group came through, slumping slightly when one group after another came without the person she was waiting for. She kept looking intently, and then when the doors parted she saw further back the person she was waiting for. And she started hopping around, excited, with delight, and as the young man came through the door, she skipped along the barrier and at the end of it, rushed up to him and gave him an enthusiastic kiss. He was a little embarrassed, you could tell, at such a public effusive display of affection, and they walked off, hand in hand to collect the luggage. It happened many years ago and I remember it, a moment of unrestrained joy.

Waiting for joy, prepared for joy.

Thomas Merton was a Roman Catholic contemplative monk. He was walking in downtown Louisville, Kentucky on an ordinary day, and coming to a busy intersection, and suddenly, he was awakened. He said this about that moment: “In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I was theirs, that we could not be alien to another

even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness... We're in the same world as everybody else; the world of the bomb, of race, hatred, the world of technology, mass media, big business, revolution, and all the rest. Yet, so does everybody belong to God. And if only they could realize this, there's no way of telling people that they're walking around, shining like the sun."

He was surprised for it happened suddenly. Yet he had done much, over time, to prepare for that moment.

A young woman was walking down Pitt Street on her way to University, and she looked out on the scene. She had a sense of such beauty, she paused for many minutes, and gazed. When we were talking about prayer here one day, she said that her rediscovered faith had helped her notice nature, notice beauty.

The practise of faith had prepared her to notice, for the joy?

The Saturday market is a place of joy for me. The diversity of people, the stories their faces tell, culturally various, all ages. The way the stall holders converse and introduce you to others they are serving. The number of people who ask – how is it going? Have you had a good week? The person who tells you about their te reo classes. The person who calls out a greeting amid the crowd. The guitarist who acknowledges your two dollar coin thrown in his guitar case. The child whose face is covered in chocolate from the pancake they have half eaten. The person who gives you a weekly update on their project. The person who tells you about how the harbour was this week, what it was like for wind-surfing. The people grimly determined to get what they need and go home as quickly as possible. What a rich series of interactions occur Saturday by Saturday.

Where is Fourth and Walnut for you? Where are those people and places for you? Perhaps your workplace, perhaps your social club, perhaps where you live?

It's a challenge to be always ready. Sometimes we are hurt and abused and it seems impossible to be open. Sometimes we experience disappointments that close us off, turn us in. It is sad to miss out, to live grimly, to have an underlying melancholy that keeps returning us to the hurt and the pain.

Joy and hope are closely related. If we hope, we prepare. We expect. We anticipate.

At the end of World War Two, families of soldiers received news of their loved one's return – official letters or telegrams. Although my father had been away for four years, my mother received no letters or telegrams telling of his return. My sister says that night after night, she heard our mother sitting in the front room and crying, imagining the worst, wondering why she had not received a letter, of being alone. In those weeks, other soldiers returned; not our father. The days stretched on. Then just a day or so before he returned, she got news. She was so filled with joy she ran across the road to the school to tell my sister, so excited she forgot to take off her apron.

How can we stay ready for joy?

Henry David Thoreau, the American author and poet said, "Only that day dawns to which we are awake."

How can we prepare for joy as a congregation?

St Paul's church Whanganui had had almost no children participating in worship for at least four years. Young families rarely came. People had got used to silence in worship, especially in Communion. The Session decided we would prepare for the day a young family would come. On the side of the sanctuary we took out pews and made a space where young children had freedom yet where parents and children could interact with others in the service. From the time that space was made, it took four years before a young family came, and then another family and then many families, until an average of 30 children participated each Sunday.

How can we as a community prepare for joy, deeper joy that endures through disappointment, that lasts through hurt, that survives ups and downs?

Like bridesmaids waiting for the bridegroom, able to celebrate when he comes.

As one with the capacity to sleep, I am comforted that both the wise and the foolish were drowsy. They all slept. They all had lamps. They all had oil. They all wanted to welcome the bridegroom. They all were well intentioned.

And some did not have enough oil, so they had to leave to replenish their stocks, and while they were away, the bridegroom came. They missed out. They weren't ready.

In the second week of Advent, the second week of December, we are having an Advent retreat with Holy Name. Simple format. During the day people will set aside

time to pray. Then at some time later in the day, late afternoon, evening, or night, people will gather or meet alone with Sister Judith Anne or Father Mark or someone like that, experienced at spiritual direction. And we will talk about what happened or didn't happen, what was hard, what was simple. Each day or as many days as people can manage, this will happen. To prepare for the joy.

And at our evening service on the last Sunday of the Christian year, there will be a service of prayer for Knox Church, that we would be a community of joy, of possibility, of openness to our city. We will attend to depth, to what endures, to what is more than us, to what replenishes our spirits and our communal spirit. We will deal with power greater than us as we express longing for the god of life and of joy.

We will prepare for the bridegroom.

Jesus is named as a man of sorrows and he was also a person of deep joy. So it was natural to think of him as a bridegroom, a bridegroom returning as the cause for a party. He embodied a god delighted in humanity, delighted in creation, raising people to life in all its fullness.

How can we be ready for joy?

By living in relationship with the joyous Christ. "... that day dawns to which we are awake."



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