

Risking Delight: Yearning for Joy in a World of Pain

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'Sorrow everywhere. Slaughter everywhere. If babies are not starving someplace, they are starving somewhere else.'

So begins Jack Gilbert's startling poem, 'A Brief for the Defense'. And yet, he goes on: 'But we enjoy our lives because that's what God wants. Otherwise the mornings before summer dawn would not be made so fine.'

It's a big claim – that God 'wants' us to enjoy our lives despite or in the midst of the evident suffering and injustice of the world. And, speaking for myself, I can't say that I always do 'enjoy my life', the beauty of the dawn notwithstanding. We seem to have so many reasons not to rejoice, so many things in the way – ranging from the often overwhelmed, frustrated and sorrowful experience of our own lives, to the tragic reality of a world seemingly helplessly immured in conflict and disaster. In this context, St Paul's well-known exhortation to 'rejoice always' and 'in everything give thanks' seems to be impossible, if not flat-out callous and irresponsible.

Yet having said this, I find myself increasingly sensing that it matters to take this exhortation to be joyful more seriously than we do, and to dare believe that our vocation is to enjoy and not simply survive our lives. That's why, tonight, I'd like to open up this theme – to share some reflections on the possibility and practice of joy, and then to invite your thoughts and questions in response.

¹ Jack Gilbert, 'A Brief for the Defense' in Roger Housden, *ten poems to change your life again & again* (New York: Harmony Books, 2007), p.79.

Ode to Joy

According to the imagination of the Hebrew and Christian traditions, joy is what happens when God is near.

‘The prophet Isaiah exultantly salutes the awaited Messiah: “You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy” (9:3)’, and he exhorts God’s people to ‘Shout aloud and sing for joy ... for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel’ (12:6). Later, the book of Isaiah imagines this joy extending to the whole creation: ‘Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth! Break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the Lord has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his suffering ones’ (49:13).²

It’s the same in the New Testament. The presence of God, in the person of Jesus, provokes (that is, ‘calls forth’) joy. Pope Francis’s first encyclical was titled ‘The Joy of the Gospel’ (*Evangelii Gaudium*), and it sets out a veritable catalogue of scriptural rejoicing. ‘Rejoice!’ is the angel’s greeting to Mary (*Lk* 1:28), whose subsequent visit to Elizabeth makes John leap for joy in his mother’s womb (cf. *Lk* 1:41). In her song of praise, Mary’s spirit rejoices in God her Saviour (*Lk* 1:47), and when Jesus begins his ministry, John the Baptist cries out: ‘For this reason, my joy has been fulfilled’ (*Jn* 3:29). Jesus himself ‘rejoiced in the Holy Spirit’ (*Lk* 10:21), and he expects his message to bring us joy: ‘I have said these things to you, so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete’ (*Jn* 15:11).

It goes on. Rejoicing is the disciples’ response at the sight of the risen Christ (*Jn* 20:20), and the life of the earliest Christian community is conducted in the key of joy. ‘In the Acts of the Apostles we read that the first Christians “ate their food with glad and generous hearts” (2:46). Wherever the disciples went, “there was great joy” (8:8); even amid persecution they continued to be “filled with joy” (13:52). The newly

² See Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, s.4.

baptized eunuch “went on his way rejoicing” (8:39), while Paul’s jailer “and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God” (16:34)’. And Pope Francis exclaims: ‘Why should we not also enter into this great stream of joy?’³ Why not indeed?! Perhaps it’s because we’re not sure how to go about it.

Before I turn more fully to this question, I want to spend a little longer exploring this scriptural connection between God and joy. It seems to have significant implications for how we conceive the matrix and potential of our lives.

Notice first that, if God’s life is seen as joyous, then it follows that all that lives issues forth from joy. Creation is no grudging accomplishment, the product of duty or necessity, just another day at the divine office.⁴ Rather, it’s an *expression* of God’s joy-filled life and the *object* of God’s rejoicing. ‘God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good’ (Gen. 1:31). On this account, the existence of the world is not justified by any external purpose and has no need of such justification. What exists simply expresses and multiplies joy. Creation is ‘for nothing’, nothing apart from joy that is – it is sheer gift and delight.

Such a vision suggests, in turn, something significant about the vocation and fulfilment of our lives – which has to do with enjoyment. This may come as a bit of a surprise. We live in an essentially utilitarian culture, and seek for our value and fulfilment in our usefulness, our accomplishments, in the ‘good’ we do. But this is where the notion of God creating from and calling forth joy is so subversive. The ‘chief end of humanity’, says the Westminster Catechism of 1647 ‘is to glorify God and to enjoy God forever’. How we do that, says theologian Jürgen Moltmann, is to rejoice in who God is, and to enjoy our own existence. For how can we glorify and enjoy God, unless we take joy in the gift God has given? ‘Joy’, he writes, ‘is the meaning of human life, joy in thanksgiving and thanksgiving as joy’.⁵

³ *Evangelii Gaudium*, s.5.

⁴ Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology & Joy*, trans. Reinhard Ulrich (London: SCM Press, 1973), p.41.

⁵ Moltmann, *Theology & Joy*, p.42.

In summary, then, and contrary to what many of us have learned or experienced, our tradition has a vast and imaginative sense of life as having been generated by, with and for joy. The validity of this vision can't be proved by argument, any more than the claim that God wants us to 'enjoy our lives' is proved by poetic appeal to the beauty of mornings before summer dawn. Indeed, as Jack Gilbert is fully aware, we could equally appeal to the fact of babies starving 'with flies in their nostrils' to argue that malice is at the foundation of the world, or at the least that joy is a scarce commodity and known only by a lucky few. So our tradition's faith that our lives are created from and for joy can only be verified, only discovered through a certain kind of experience. In Pope Francis's words, we're invited to 'enter into this great stream of joy', to encounter it as an ever present possibility, a gift awaiting reception. How is this possible?

Liberated for Rejoicing

As I've pondered this question, I begin to sense there are two movements or practices necessary for entering into joy. I want to say a little about each of these.

Accepting

The first movement is to do with 'accepting'. Acceptance might seem a pretty low-key, even somewhat flaccid concept, but as a *practice* it's surprisingly challenging and surprisingly powerful.

In the gospels, Jesus tells a story imagining the kingdom of God as a great banquet – a festive, joyous occasion. The invitations have been issued, but when the meal is prepared and it's time to come to the table, the guests one by one back out. 'They all alike began to make excuses', Luke's gospel says, pleading the need to manage their land, their oxen and their newly married state (Luke 14: 18-20). As theologian Douglas John Hall remarks, this is a story about a banquet from which,

ironically, ‘everyone wants to stay away’. When you think about it, this is rather odd. What’s so difficult to accept about an invitation to a feast?

I began to get an inkling of this, I think, when I was in my mid-thirties. I was unhappy and my life wasn’t what I wanted it to be. I was single and childless and looked set to remain so; I had a decent job, but it wasn’t satisfying; nothing was terrible, but neither was it terribly exciting. My life seemed grey, myself a total nonentity, and despite several attempts to enliven my prospects, nothing was really shifting. On this particular day, I was at an airport, my familiar litany of dissatisfaction and self-refusal playing through my head. Suddenly, the thought came – I am the only one in the whole world, the only one who is now or ever shall be given to live *this* life.

In a poem called ‘And Yet’, the Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz vividly depicts this realization of the radical singularity of each one of our lives. He speaks of ‘every leaf of grass’ having ‘its fate’,

Just as a sparrow on the roof, a field mouse,
And an infant that would be named John or Teresa
[Is] born for long happiness or shame and suffering
Once only, till the end of the world.⁶

In the airport that day, I suddenly recognised the extraordinary singularity of my existence – not as a truism, or statement of the bleeding obvious, but as a matter for wonder and an experience of gift. And in that moment, I accepted the invitation to the banquet (such as it was) of my own life. I stopped wishing for some other life, some better, more glamorous, more ‘together’ life – I accepted the life I had – all that it was and all that it wasn’t. This was an experience of acceptance not as resignation but embrace. The image I had was of holding my life close, chest to chest, yielding myself to it, no longer resisting it. It came as a profound relief and as an opening – if

⁶ Milosz, Czeslaw, *Provinces*, trans. Czeslaw Milosz and Robert Hass (New York: The Ecco Press, 1991).

not at that moment to riotous joy – at least to a sense of contentment and blessing. How's that for an airport experience – and it wasn't even the Qantas lounge!

As I explore what allowed for that experience of deep acceptance, it seems connected to what our tradition calls 'poverty of spirit', the condition of having come to the end of my own resources and so finally to the end of striving. Laurence Freeman has said that 'If we want to understand poverty of spirit we have to accept it as the reaching of the boundaries of our being and our capacity, and finding we are unable to go further by ourselves'.⁷ We don't usually reach this place without a good deal of resistance. We tend to be dragged here, kicking and screaming, by way of failure, lament, exhaustion and despair. That was certainly the case for me. And yet strangely it's as we finally let go our expectations of what our lives should be, our efforts to make things right, or to manage life on our terms, that we are newly opened to the possibility of gift and delight. Freeman continues: 'Poverty of spirit is a "grand poverty" because when we have touched this boundary of being ..., it surprisingly recedes and marvelously our being expands. That is the resurrection'.⁸ And resurrection is joy.

These links between poverty of spirit, acceptance and joy, are strongly affirmed by our tradition. We see this connection, for example, in the life of Mary. Her 'lowliness', or poverty of spirit, evidenced by her willingness to let go her life plans, was the condition of her accepting 'yes' at the annunciation, her 'let it be unto me'. And it was this acceptance that led to rejoicing for her and for the world. We see something similar in the life of St Francis – that most overtly joyful of the saints – whose access to joy was acceptance of his own poverty, enacted famously when he stripped himself naked and when he embraced the leper.

⁷ Laurence Freeman, *Light Within: Meditation as pure prayer* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 1986 and 2008), p.76.

⁸ Freeman, *Light Within*, p.76.

The paradox seems to be that fully accepting the gift God would give us of joyful life involves a necessary letting go and relinquishment, the willingness to be dispossessed of life on our terms, so to receive what is actually offered. In the parable of the great banquet, the guests are invited but they're unable to sit lightly enough to their interests and possessions so as to accept the proffered gift. As a result, they miss the feast. And who, in the end, gets to come? 'The poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame' (Luke 14:21) – the poor and the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Risking Delight

Thus far, then, I've been speaking of accepting the invitation to life we've each received, whatever our circumstances, whatever our sense of disappointment or frustration, whatever we've missed out on and however it hurts. This is the first movement necessary for entering into joy, and for some, it's the work of a lifetime, a crucifying process – accomplished by way of sadness, shame, guilt, anger, despair, dread and costly relinquishment. Yet ultimately this process of radical acceptance issues in the possibility of 'risking delight'.⁹ This, I think, is the second practice involved in being liberated for rejoicing.

The notion of having to *risk* delight may also seem strange. In what sense is delight, a risk? Isn't it what we all yearn and hope for? Well yes – but it's also intrinsically bound up with vulnerability, and there's the rub.

We 'risk' delight when we're willing to have a go in life, when we abandon ourselves whole-heartedly to a vocation or a relationship or a cause. It's a risk because nothing's guaranteed. Yes – we might be delighted, but we might also be disappointed, and so the temptation is to hedge our bets, to limit our vulnerability – to put in place some safety net in case it all goes wrong. And then somehow joy

⁹ Gilbert, 'A Brief for the Defense'.

eludes us. And yet we know from the life of Jesus, from the story of creation, that this is not God's way – and that our self-protective instincts limit our participation in and reception of God's joyous life. This is poignantly illustrated in the parable of the talents, where the servant who's judged severely is the one who won't take the risk, won't give himself to the task, who secures what he's got out of fear, while the servants who dare to have a go, to risk themselves and their possessions are the ones who 'enter into the joy of [the] Master' (Matt. 25:21).

Notice too that 'risking' delight isn't only about what we do or how we participate in life. It's also to do with the practice of enjoyment itself. Jack Gilbert says: 'We must have the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless furnace of this world'. And if you're like me, you might have to work at not resisting this invitation. It seems – well, risky – almost courting disaster and tempting fate.

There's another concern that goes alongside this – no doubt you've heard it, and you've probably voiced it. How can any of us rejoice while so many suffer? In the face of this, isn't my yearning for joy just insensitive and selfish, a self-indulgent luxury in a world of so much need? So let me conclude by saying a little about this.

Yearning for Joy in a World of Pain

It's often said that 'joy' is deeper and more pervasive than 'happiness' or pleasure. I've been suggesting this is because our joy is sourced in the nature of God. If this is true, then what gets in the way of joy is not primarily suffering or sorrow, but alienation from the joyous life of God.

This would be almost impossible to say, if we didn't have the testimony, of those who (in the midst of terrible suffering) have discovered the inexhaustible reality of joy. St Paul seems to have known it. He exhorted the early churches to rejoice even in the midst of persecution and, as Laurence Freeman has remarked,

despite the difficulties, setbacks and dangers of his life, he never lost his joy in ministry.

We also have the extraordinary testimony of the Dutch Jew, Etty Hillesum, writing in 1943 from a transit camp on her way to death in Auschwitz. As the camp empties with transport after transport, Etty's letters convey the all-but-unspeakable horror and insanity of the 'fatal mechanism' in which she and her fellow Jews had 'become enmeshed'.¹⁰ And yet, in letter after letter, she also exults in the beauty of the sky and expresses her gratitude for food packages and news she's received from friends. Once she exclaims, 'How glorious the Psalms are',¹¹ and that 'Spirits go up and down but humour keeps breaking through'.¹² In one of her final letters, she writes: 'How terribly young we were only a year ago on this heath, Maria! Now we've grown a little older ... we have become marked by suffering for a whole lifetime. And yet life in its unfathomable depths is so wonderfully good, Maria – I have to come back to that time and again. And if we just care enough, God is in safe hands with us despite everything'.¹³

This is a sense of life's goodness and a capacity for continuing gratitude that's unimaginably hard won. Writing after one transport, she says: 'There was a moment when I felt in all seriousness that after this night, it would be a sin ever to laugh again. But then', she goes on, 'I reminded myself that some of those who had gone away had been laughing, even if only a handful of them this time'. And in the end, when she and her family were loaded onto the train, she says 'we left the camp singing'.¹⁴ Was this singing just a pious avoidance of reality, a mere whistling in the dark? I don't think so. As I read Etty's letters, it reflects the deep joy she's come to know in her life – a joy which encompasses profound suffering and is shot through with the sorrow

¹⁰ Etty Hillesum, *Letters from Westerbork*, trans. Arnold J. Pomerans (London: Grafton Books, 1988), 126.

¹¹ Hillesum, *Letters from Westerbork*, p.141.

¹² Hillesum, *Letters from Westerbork*, p.142.

¹³ Hillesum, *Letters from Westerbork*, p.144.

¹⁴ Hillesum, *Letters from Westerbork*, p.146.

of existence. It's of a piece with the New Testament's understanding that in this life our joy will not be complete and is not yet fully realized. Nevertheless, she witnesses to the fact that, despite everything, joy is given, an ever present reality. Our access, whatever our circumstances, is by way of our life embraced as we dare to risk delight, keeping faith in the presence and promise of God's joy, just as Jesus did when 'for the sake of the joy that was set before him, [he] endured the cross' (Heb. 12:2).

And this, I think, opens up a different way of relating to our yearning for joy in a world of pain. I said earlier that I have a tendency to think that enjoying life is a kind of indulgence. I behave as though I'm not allowed and not there yet. Prior to everything and everyone being fixed, joy seems luxury I can't and won't afford. But what if it's just the other way around?

More and more I am convinced that joy isn't a luxury – and that we, our church and our world are dying for want of it. The refusal of joy is the refusal of God, whose presence provokes rejoicing. When we live as 'kill-joys' (and isn't that an illuminating phrase?) we tend to be living earnest, dour, self-important kinds of lives, quenching the Spirit, shutting down freedom and laughter and vitality. This suggests that, far from being an irresponsible and dispensable practice, enjoyment is the sign of our redemption and of our communion with the true source of our life. It is thus the only place from which we can hope truly to participate in bringing about God's peace, liberty and justice.

As it happens, this coming Sunday – the fourth Sunday in Lent – is Laetare Sunday. The word 'laetare' means 'rejoice', and the day takes its name from the traditional introit of the day. 'Rejoice, O Jerusalem: and come together all you that love her: rejoice with joy, you that have been in sorrow'. On this day, it's as if the joy that is God's life and God's gift can't be held off any more – it can't wait till the Day of Resurrection, but bursts into the midst of this penitential season. It's as if, to

paraphrase Leonard Cohen, in the midst of our depression ‘cheerfulness breaks through’.

So, dare we imagine that God actually *wants* us to enjoy our lives? And from *this* place to reach out to others? I wonder, what would it mean for each of us, if we took that seriously? If we allowed ourselves to *be* delighted, and so join in the rejoicing that enlivens and heals the world?