**
15th October 2017
Matthew 22.1-14
Philippians 4.1-9

 Give me Joy in my Heart**

*Gracious God – may your Living Word come to us afresh this morning – so touch, we pray our minds and hearts with your grace and truth – through Christ our Lord and in the power of your Spirit. Amen*

At the beginning of last week I attended part of the Central Baptist Association’s Ministers’ Conference at the High Leigh Centre in Hoddesdon.

It was great to be alongside friends, some of whom I’ve known and served with for thirty years.

We began the first session as we were led in worship by Colin Pye, one of our Regional Ministers. He took a mix and match approach incorporating liturgy, visuals, hymns and songs.

One of the things we sang that afternoon, which brought a smile to most of our faces and took us back to Sunday School days, was the hymn: Give me joy in my heart keep me praising… 30 ministers singing it with gusto – and it was a nice moment!

You can’t really read Philippians without noticing just how full of joy and thanksgiving Paul feels as he writes this letter. This church fills him with joy.

So, here are a few contexts for us to seek the Joy of Jesus.

Paul seems to want us to find joy in life.

Remarkable that, in a way. Acts 16 tells us about Paul’s visit to the Roman Colony of Philippi. He went there with his fellow evangelist Silas and they met up with Lydia, a seller of purple cloth as they attend a prayer gathering that turned into her baptism. A few days later, En route once again to Lydia’s meeting, they heal a slave girl of her demon possession and her owner takes so much offence that these two travelling preachers are once again imprisoned. At midnight, whilst singing prayer songs, there is an earthquake and the prison walls are breached. Paul, and this is amazing, persuades his fellow prisoners to stay put, and in this way the prison superintendent avoids the wrath of his superiors – and he too asks for baptism.

So Paul’s memory of Philippi was a mixed bag, yes two baptismal services but loads of criticism, unfair treatment and even a prison sentence. Yet for all that Paul is joyful about Philippi. He remembers it as a place of opportunity and a church full of generous and loving people.

That’s not the impression you get from Jesus as he told the parable set for today. It’s a Wedding Banquet and shouldn’t this have been a day full of joy. Yet no one turns up. No one wants to share in this joy. The marriage celebration has a massive boycott.

So instead of the guests previously invited a new cohort is brought in – and they weren’t even on the reserve list.

Theologically speaking this seems to be about those of us who turn down the invitation to celebrate with Jesus. Yet this doesn’t stop him constantly inviting others to join in the banquet.

When we visited Australia for a few months – last century – I purchased a book of Australian slang. You know one of the saddest things I read in it was that the word Wowser, meaning killjoy, was originally a word used in Australia for church goers. Ouch!

Reminds me a bit of what Gandhi is supposed to have said: We’d all be Christians if it wasn’t for the Christians’.

Jesus said: I have come to give you abundant life. He talked of weddings and parties, he turned water into wine, restored sight and hope to shattered lives. So much of Jesus’ message was about joy and now in Philippians Paul takes up the theme too.

 Joy in life, how about joy in others?

I get that, and I suspect you do too.

I get it in the conversations I have with people whose demeanour changes and whose faces light up every time they talk so lovingly and enthusiastically of their family.

And I think I get it as I listen to Paul speak of his joy in serving with others at Philippi. There’s no way you could read Philippians chapter 4 and come away with the idea that he is advocating what we used to call ‘One Man Ministry’. Paul appreciates collegiality, he’s a team player.

In today’s reading he actually names some members of that team. There’s Euodia and Syntyche and Clement his fellow co-worker.

We sometimes think, perhaps mistakenly that these two women had fallen out and Paul was telling them to make it up. Yet that isn’t the way that people wrote their letters in that ancient Greco-Roman world. In those days you would often encourage behaviour that was already happening. So, it’s more than possible that what Paul is really saying here, yet it’s lost in translation, is: Euodia and Syntyche – just carry on as you are, agreeing in the Lord, you are doing a great job so keep at it.

What is clear is that Paul included women into his leadership teams. Most scholars agree that in a day and age when women were basically invisible, to actually name Euodia and Syntyche here in Philippians just shows how much Paul valued them and probably worked with them as fellow leaders.

This year the United Reformed Church is remembering with joy that it was amongst the first of the mainstream Churches in the UK to ordain women as Constance Coltman became the first woman minister in the Congregational Union in 1917.

Give me joy in life, in others and thirdly: give me joy in service.

Constance Coltman wanted to serve and alongside her husband she ministered at Kilburn, Wolverton, Oxford and Haverhill.

Paul writes to the church, meeting in this Roman colony of Philippi, and he says: I wish you joy in the Lord always Again I say: all joy be yours. Be known to everyone for your consideration of others.

I often think that churches have DNA. Every congregation has a certain character and it’s great when you are in one where the members have a real sense of consideration for each other and where there is a real desire to show that compassion outwardly – whether it’s supporting a mission project or opening up the building in hospitality.

And it’s often in the giving of service that we experience our greatest joys together.

It’s been said for many years that the future of ecumenism isn’t in holding more meetings together – because when Baptists, Anglicans and Methodists sit around a table with an agenda in front of them – well, we all pretty much look like each other anyway! No, the future of ecumenism is service together, not committee based but task based. Running a drop-in centre for the homeless, a midweek community café or a day centre for those with dementia.

Joy in serving together.

Joy in life, others and service. Yet, this is only really possible if we find joy in faith. If we are people who have discovered Joy in Jesus Christ.

Another translation of Philippians 4.4 reads: Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice.

How does that eucharist prayer go?:

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God
It is indeed our duty and our JOY
at all times and in all places
to give you thanks and praise.

That’s the tragedy behind the Parable of the Wedding Banquet. The king wanted to share the joy, the life and the love of that day with the guests. He offered them so much – but they were kill joys and stubbornly stayed away.

I started this sermon by telling you about last week’s Ministers’ Conference. Let me end by telling you a bit more.

Of the joy I felt as one of the speakers, a retired College Principal, told us how he used these last three years painting and selling his prints to help a charity supporting abused women in Calcutta.

Of the joy I felt listening to another speaker, pastor of one of the largest Baptist churches in the country telling us that his best pastoral moment this year was bumping into a church member who’d just been made redundant through the crash of the Monarch airline, and spending 30 mins talking with him, and praying for him by the peanut shelf in Sainsburys.

Of the joy I felt chatting to one of my closest friends as she told me the Parent and Toddler group at her village church has just taken off this autumn.

Of the joy I felt talking to a minister I’ve never ever met before as he told me his church of 70 members has just completed and fully paid for a 1.4-million-pound rebuilding programme.

Of the joy I felt telling people of AFC, our new intern, our Toilet Twinning afternoon and all the faithfulness I find here in the many organisations that run week by week.

This is not a Pollyanna forced and slightly cranky optimism. It’s real. Real joy. Joy in God, joy in God’s world, joy even in the face of struggle, sorrows, se- backs and adversity.

Brian Wren, the URC hymnwriter, puts it like this in one of his verses: I come with joy to meet my Lord, forgiven, loved and free.

St Paul puts it I wish you joy in the Lord. Again, I say, all joy be yours.

And last Monday we sang it: Give me joy in my heart, keep me praising.

May it be so, for all of us, in the name of The Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

*Ian Green, Amersham, 13th October 2017*