

Sts Peter and Paul 2018  
(2 Timothy 4:6-8.17-18 / Matthew 16:13-19)  
29.06.2018

One word caught my attention in today's gospel passage: *happy*. Jesus said to Peter: *You are a happy man*. Peter's happiness – recognised and commended by the Master – stemmed from his profession of faith in Jesus as *the Christ, the Son of the Living God*.

It strikes me that happiness, blessedness, a sense of beatitude, is also characteristic of the great Saint Paul's experience as an apostle of Jesus Christ. There are many passages in Paul's writings wherein he speaks of the happiness he found in the Lord. These passages are all the more striking because the apostle Paul speaks of joy in the Lord most when he is caught in the midst of trouble, trials and sufferings endured because of his belonging to Christ Jesus.

What makes for both Peter's and Paul's happiness is their recognition of Christ's presence in their lives and the fact that they can see – even in the harshest of circumstances they encounter – how God is operating; how Christ's hand is mysteriously guiding all things, working out the Lord's purpose, bringing everything together for his servants' greatest good.

I'm sure there is a message for all of us here: the assurance that even in the face of the most painful and difficult situations we can find happiness in the Lord. Our happiness will not necessarily be a bubbling exuberance, an effervescence, but a deep sense of inner peace which instils true joy in the heart.

Perhaps nowhere better than in chapter 4 of his Letter to the Philippians does Paul make the point that true happiness can be and is to be found in any situation of life. Indeed, it awaits to be discovered even in the most horrendous of circumstances.

Jesus' own *wisdom sayings* contained in the Beatitudes make the same point, do they not?

True happiness is found when we recognise the Lord is with us when we find ourselves humbled, humiliated even, plunged into mourning, longing for justice, hungering, thirsting, reviled and persecuted... What matters in all these circumstances is that we strive to be situated in accord with God's will for us.

As long as we live *in Christ* – in the assurance that Christ is with us and that He lives within us – then we can calmly traverse even the most painful passages of our lives and make our way through the most horrendously difficult circumstances imaginable.

We find peace, *Shalom* – fullness of well-being, a quiet, joyful inner tranquillity – when we focus on Christ; seeing all that befalls us in His light, knowing that He gives sense to all things.

The apostle Paul could write to the Philippians: *I have learned to get along happily whether I have much or little. I know how to live on almost nothing or with everything. I have learned the secret of contentment in every situation, whether it be a full stomach or hunger, plenty or want; for I can do everything God asks me to do with the help of Christ who gives me the strength and power.*

Paul wrote these words while facing a trial in Rome, awaiting an outcome which he knew might well lead to his execution. What peace and what interior happiness his words express! Paul had been both rich and poor, comfortable and in pain; healthy and sick; popular and defamed – a target of mob violence, just like His Master. Paul testifies very clearly in the lines I have just quoted – and many other similar passages – how he had learned to be content and even joyful, no matter what the surrounding circumstances. In this Paul has much to teach us.

An important lesson to be drawn from Paul's teaching is that despite our painful life circumstances, our day to day difficulties, the injustices to which we are subjected, our hurts, pains and sorrows... Christ can be our joy.

The same point is made in the teaching of Peter as well. This is something we will see in a moment when we dip into the Letters of Peter.

Paul speaks of the importance of *knowing Christ* in and through everything: *I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and participation in His sufferings, becoming like Him.*

The apostle Paul's determined purpose was *to know Christ*, to become progressively like Him, more deeply and intimately acquainted with Him, perceiving, recognising and understanding the wonders of the person of Christ more strongly and more clearly, *so as to become more and more like Him, conformed to Him, in every way.*

Paul's whole teaching and the testimony of his life shows us that this is what we are all called to; it is that to which we should all aspire: to be like Christ, to live in Christ... to allow Christ to live in us, to welcome His life into our hearts.

As I said a moment ago, in his writings Peter makes much the same point as Paul. I think especially of what Peter has to say in chapter 4 of his First Letter. A central theme of the whole of this Letter is that we should not only expect to experience trials, but we should also rejoice in them. Peter insists that through the difficult circumstances of our lives we receive an opportunity to share not only in Christ's sufferings, but also in His glory. Peter dares to pen these words to his readers: *In your trials and sufferings be really glad, be happy, rejoice – because these trials and sufferings will make you partners with Christ in His suffering, and afterwards you will have the wonderful joy of sharing His glory...* He goes on: *Be happy if you are cursed and insulted for being a Christian, for when that happens the Spirit of God will come upon you with great glory.*

What Peter states here and elsewhere – and what Paul also affirms in so many places – must be properly understood. It is not that these apostles were masochists or advocates of suffering; it is that they were men who were aware of the reality of people's lives and who knew that suffering is part of the human condition. Suffering will be the lot of every human being at one time or another. Peter and Paul both experienced pain at various levels of their being as part of their human experience in this broken world. The same is true for every person – including each one of us.

The audiences to which the apostles addressed their writings – just like our gathering here this morning – was made up of hurting people. Those to whom both Peter and Paul wrote were undergoing – or likely to undergo – the same lot as the apostles themselves. They were suffering persecution and rejection in diverse ways – if they were not all being subjected to overt physical abuse, many of them found themselves being set aside, put down, ridiculed and reviled because of their belonging to Christ. This was the price they paid for their belief in Jesus as the Christ. Discipleship came – discipleship comes – at a cost.

Peter and Paul wanted to encourage those to whom they wrote. Their letters were not the only means by which they conveyed their message; the example of their lives – the fortitude they displayed – were living words.

If both Peter and Paul could speak of *joy in the Lord* it was both of them experienced this grace.

What Jesus said of Peter could also be said of Paul: *You are a happy man.* Peter and Paul were both happy men. We are all called to be happy men and women. St Augustine reminds us of the legitimacy of our longing for happiness when he states: *For who wishes anything for any other reason than that he may be happy.* Nearer to us in time C.S. Lewis echoes Augustine's thought when he reminds us: *It is a Christian duty... for everyone to be as happy as he (or she) can.* I was struck just last week to hear our Abbot General ask a brother in the

course of a Visitation we carried out together: *Are you happy?* The Abbot General went on to remind the brother sitting before us that we not only have the right to be happy but the *devoir*, the duty, to be happy.

We are all called to know joy in the Lord and in the joy of the Lord to find the strength we need for life's journey, with all the challenges that will inevitably come our way as our life-stories unfold day after day.

May each one of us who confesses Jesus as the Christ this morning be graced to recognise the happiness that is ours as a result of our profession of faith.

Amen!