

What is the essence of the Christian faith...? At first glance this question might seem easy to answer. If we go to church, listen to the sermon every Sunday, read the Bible (or at least hear the Sunday readings), pray our prayers, participate in worship then surely we have an understanding of the essence of the Christian faith, undoubtedly we can come to an acceptable and satisfactory answer to the question. Surely, the answer can't be that difficult. As a newly ordained priest, this should be even easier for me, after all I've been through seminary: I studied the Christian faith so that I could become a well-informed leader in the church. I studied Theology, the Bible, Pastoral Theology, Missiology, History, Liturgy, Evangelism and everything else, all so that I could truly understand the essence of the Christian faith, the essence of the 'Good News'. For established leaders in the church, like David this should be a cake walk, they've completed their studies and they have been leaders in the church for their whole career, so surely defining the essence of the Christian faith is easy for them... So what is the essence of Christian faith?

[List a number of possibilities, ask congregation to think of their own]

These are all great answers which begin to get at the essence or heart of the Christian faith and they all certainly find their place in the Christian message of hope and salvation preached in Jesus Christ by the Church throughout history but what makes them good news. The Gospel of Mark relates that at the beginning of Jesus' ministry he proclaims "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news!" What about the Christian story is good news, what makes it exciting, what makes it something that we just can't keep to ourselves, what makes the Gospel the greatest story that the world has ever known? What is the heart of the Christian faith?

One of my professors at seminary tells a story about his experience of explaining the essence of the Christian faith to a group of non-Christians, a story which I think offers a perfect starting point to understanding the heart of the Christian faith. Just up the street from here at OCAD my professor had been meeting with a group of young professionals for a number weeks discussing a range of matters including faith and spirituality. At the time he worked for InterVarsity Christian Fellowship and so he was immersed in the world of campus evangelism that he lived for these sorts of opportunities to build relationships with people and share his Christian faith.

He had developed solid relationships with the group over time as they discussed all manners of things and one evening he asked them, "What do you think of as the heart of Christian faith?" Since many of them had Christian friends, and they had talked about faith he didn't feel that he was catching them off guard. One of them said, "Oh, it's all about accepting-Jesus-Christ-as-your-Lord-and-Saviour." The young man made it sound almost like a single word. Another said, "Well, we're all sinners, but Jesus died for our sin, so if we confess our sins, we'll be forgiven." A third responded very sarcastically, "Well, it's all about worshipping God. Though, why God needs to be worshipped, I really didn't know." None of them sounded very excited about what they had heard. Although the three responses were in line with how Christians have understood the essence or heart of Christian faith, not one of them had heard this as 'good news'

Then (as my professor confessed that he had hoped), they asked him, "So what do *you* think Christianity is all about?" Having had a chance to think about this beforehand, he said, "Actually, I think it's all about joy. God loves us and wants to fill the world with joy. But every day, you and I do things to mess up God's plan, so that the world is not filled with joy. But God says, 'If you follow Jesus, I will begin to fill your life with joy, and through you the whole world.'"

There was a silence, and then one said, "I've never heard that before." Another one said, "I kind of like it."

Joy. Joy is the essence of the Christian faith, joy is the reason that the news is good, exciting and the reason we can't help but share it with the whole world. God intends for us to be joyful, to be in joyful relationship with him, with our neighbours and with all creation. There are fleeting moments in our lives when we experience pure un-adulterated joy. I am thoroughly convinced that children are far better at experiencing joy than we adults are. Children have a knack for finding joy in the smallest of things, in the things that we as adults think of as ordinary, mundane. For me there are four distinct moments that I can remember where I experienced a taste of that pure joy: the day I married Bethany, the birth of each of my daughters and finally last Sunday at my ordination here at Grace Church. These are moments where I was swept up in the joy of God, where the entirety of my body and soul were soaked with that pure joy that God

intends for each of us. Now, I want to be careful here however, God doesn't want us to just be happy. Happiness, as we understand it today, is not a sign that we are blessed by God or that we are living in right relationship with him; being unhappy does not stop us from experiencing joy: joy is something far deeper than happiness, joy is something that is far more costly, far more precious than happiness as our reading of Psalm 126 suggests.

Our Psalm today echoes God's promise of restoration and the resultant joy that is at the heart of the life of Israel and, by extension, the life of Church and individual Christians. The Psalm reads "When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, 'The LORD has done great things for them.' The LORD has done great things for us, and we rejoiced. Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like the watercourses in the Negeb. May those who sow in tears, reap with shouts of joy. Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves." Here we see the transition from sorrow to joy. We see the shift from misfortune and sorrow to God restoring the fortunes of Israel. God intends for his people to reap with shouts of joy, to come home reveling in their joy.

While it might seem that Psalmist is merely talking about happiness in this passage, in the final line of the psalm we have an allusion to the themes of exile and return: those who go out weeping, those who have experienced exile or separation from God, will come home with shouts of joy will return to their promised land and to their God in joy. The psalm promises joy to a people who have experienced oppression, violence, and famine and finally for ancient Israel the worst form of suffering: Exile. By their actions of turning away from God the people had experienced exile from their land and more importantly from God himself. In the face of this exile, the Psalmist declares that Israel is joyful, not so that they might sadistically find joy in their pain and suffering but rather because God is promising them a reason that they will be joyful, God is showing them the reason they would sing aloud with gladness, God is showing them a reason that they will reap with shouts of joy. God is bringing them back from exile, Israel who felt and was forsaken by God in exile, was once again to be saved by God, once again they would live in God's Promised Land, and once again they would live in right relationship with their God. Joy is intrinsically linked with suffering, intrinsically linked because joy is found joy in the people and things that are worth sacrificing for.

Unlike Israel, however, we know that God's promise of joy for us is rooted in Jesus Christ. In the first line of our Psalm, the psalmist proclaims "When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion. We were like those who dream" We know that we do not need to dream any longer. We know this has been accomplished in person and work of Jesus. As we come to the end of the season of Advent we remember God coming to dwell among us, we remember as our Nicene Creed reminds us that Jesus, the Son of God, "became incarnate of the Virgin Mary and was made man." While we wait to celebrate in remembrance the coming of Jesus on Christmas, we also remember where Jesus' story climaxes: on the cross. And so we remember that on the cross, Jesus was God-forsaken. At the cross Jesus experienced the ultimate exile. At the cross Jesus experienced total separation from God the Father, so that we would never again be God-forsaken, so that we would never again experience the complete and utter joylessness of being apart from God. In Jesus' death and resurrection we have been adopted as children of God, we have been invited to share in the joy of the family of God. As children of God, like my professor said we are called to follow Jesus, to live as his disciples in the world. As we follow Jesus we will begin to experience the joy that God intended for us all along, not a shallow happiness that our culture longs for, but a joy born out of exile a joy born out of the pain of once being separated from God who is the ultimate source of our joy.

Just like Israel in Psalm 126 our joy bears witness to God, our joy glorifies God, our joy honours and praises God, our joy magnifies God. Like Israel, God entrusts us with his joy so that we overflow so abundantly with it that we can't help but share the good news of Jesus Christ with our neighbours, our colleagues, our families, our friends and even the passerby on the street. In this Advent and Christmas season as you return home to spend time with friends, family and loved ones: remember that joy is heart of the Christian faith, remember that God intends joy for you and for the whole world, not a shallow happiness or well-being, but a joy rooted deeply in the God who creates all things, sustains all things and renews all things. Thanks be to God!