

TFTD L6: Gladness and generosity

Monday March 14th



This week's HOLY HABIT is GLADNESS AND GENEROSITY, based on Acts 2.46: Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts. [Acts 2.46]

Andrew Roberts tells the story of the preacher who visited a church. A grim-faced steward told him in no uncertain terms, 'This church doesn't do any of that enthusiastic happiness. Ours is a deep joy.' After an hour of their deep joy, the preacher 'encouraged the gathering to send a message from the depths of their joy to their faces, as a smile or two would not go amiss. And with that he promptly left.' (Holy Habits, p.200)

The famous hymn 'the Old Hundredth' is based on Psalm 100 (which John Murray will be reflecting on tomorrow). When I was young, we used to sing a verse which went: 'Him serve with fear, his praise forth tell ...' But I discovered that the hymn originally went: 'Him serve with mirth, his praise

forth tell' — which fits much better with the context ('come ye before him and rejoice') and with the original Hebrew. It's as if somewhere along the line, the people who put together the hymn-books began to feel, it can't possibly be seemly to praise God with mirth. You can't have laughing in church — can you? So they changed it to fear instead. And for a lot of people (sadly) that kind of fear has dominated their impression of what church is all about.

Yet gladness has always been — and must always be — a mark of the life of the church. On that first day of Pentecost, the effect of the outpouring of God's spirit 'was one of noise and colour and drama as the party of all parties began':

The church was born in gladness. Gladness for what God had done through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and the outpouring of the Spirit as promised long ago by the prophets and explained by Peter in his Pentecost address [Acts ch.2]. There was gladness in the home, gladness in the temple, and gladness out on the streets. (Holy Habits p.200)

This is the same surprising fount of gladness (agalliasis) that bubbles up out of the depths of God's joy in Mary's exultant song of praise when she heard that she was to be the mother of God's Son. This is the song that we call the Magnificat (Luke 1.46-55):

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour:
For he has looked upon the humble state of his servant,
From henceforth, all generations will call me blessed.

It's the same fountain of gladness that sweeps Jesus away in Luke 10.21, when the disciples have just returned from their first mission without him, all hyped up and excited at finding what they can do in the name of Jesus: On that same occasion Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent, and revealed them to little children."

And it's the same joy that characterizes the life of the believer: look at Acts

16.34 (the converted jailer) and 1 Peter 1.6-8: You have not seen Jesus, but you love him. You do not see him now, but you believe in him, and so you rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy. And if that's true, then surely it ought to show in our worship — and our daily lives? (And yes, in case you're wondering — you can laugh in church!)

But what does it mean to make 'gladness and generosity' a holy habit? Of course we all have times when we feel cheerful — and times when we don't. You can't feel 'gladness' to order — and there's nothing worse than feeling you have to put on a happy face all the time when you don't feel like it. Christianity isn't about pretending to feelings you don't have — or covering up grief and sadness. Jesus didn't pretend — he shares our sorrows as well as our joys. He wept when his friend Lazarus died (John 11.35). He wept over the fate of the city of Jerusalem (Luke 19.41-42), and longed to gather her children into his arms like a mother hen sheltering her chicks (Luke 13.34). He felt the sorrows of the world.

The holy habit of gladness doesn't mean denying those sorrows. One reason I love the Psalms is because they allow us to be honest in our prayers, and to lament and cry out to God when sorrow fills our hearts. Watching what's going on in Ukraine, I often think of the words of the hymn:

**And when human hearts are breaking
Under sorrow's iron rod,
Then we find that self-same aching
Deep inside the heart of God.**

But making gladness a 'habit' does mean not letting fear and sorrow have the last word — not letting it define our lives, and our worship. If you look at those references to joy above, you'll see that in each case the context is one of trouble and strife. This is not a facile joy which ignores life's difficulties — or our own failures. But it's a joy that knows that ultimately, God's kingdom of love and joy and peace will win — the victory is assured. As Julian of Norwich says in *The Revelation of Divine Love*, "He said not 'Thou shalt not be tempested, thou shalt not be travailed, thou shalt not be dis-eased'; but he said, 'Thou shalt not be overcome.'"



So how do we make it a habit? That's something you might like to think about (answers on a postcard please!). Committing ourselves to joining together in worship is one way — worship that focuses our minds in what God has done for us instead of hiding ourselves away with our fears. Giving is another — focusing on somebody's else needs instead of our own — that's one meaning of 'generosity'. And another is simplicity or singleness of heart — which is another way of translating 'generosity'. Focusing on the moment — looking for God's gifts in the spring sunshine, or the daffs, or some coltsfoot by the canal — is a powerful way of building gladness into our lives. Take a photo — you'll be surprised what you find!

God bless, Loveday

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