

Sermon for the Seventh Sunday of Easter, May 20, 2007 Yr C
Acts 16:16-35: Psalm 97, Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21, John 17:20-26
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Rejoice in the Lord you righteous, and give thanks to his holy name.

Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice. Episcopal churches are not noted for being the most exciting church in town. In fact we are often the butt of jokes and referred to as the frozen chosen. We are not noted for rejoicing in church or expressing our deeply held beliefs about God. We are certainly not noted for the raising of our hands or the clapping of our hands or showing any sign of emotions in our liturgy. As the wise Yoda of Stars Wars fame might say of us; “In church, emotions, we show not.”

Perhaps somewhere in the middle ages, when the presence of God in the elements and specifically in the host, became more central to the beliefs of the church, the sense of awe and reverence took a more serious turn and church became the house of God. God was more explicitly experienced in the church building. People came to the church to pray, to visit God encased in the tabernacle, to conduct their private devotions. And so Church became a place of reverence and silence. It became a place to be quiet; to be serious; to be properly dressed in our Sunday best; to have music that is at least two hundred years old and, for the most part, can only be sung by a trained choir. Since the invention of the church organ it seems to have been forgotten that the biblical form of music was cymbal and harp.

The new church hymnal came out in 1982 and by 1984 it was being strongly suggested that the church music be much more modern. We entered 1990's as a decade of Evangelism. Packages of material were designed and sent out monthly to help parishes revisit their mission statements, learn how to reach out to those who were unchurched, how to

enliven their liturgy, conduct Bible study groups etc. And yet, ten years later, by the year 2000, there were parishes in which that all that material was stored and few, if any, of those packages of material on Evangelism had been opened. For some churches, change could not come fast enough. For others change was coming too fast for them to assimilate it. The loss of the '28 prayer book and their familiar hymnal was too much grief for them to rejoice.

Rejoice, rejoice, again I say rejoice. Many of us were brought up with a strict understanding of church. It was not always a place of comfort. God was not always a God of love. We have forgotten that the early church was a domestic church where people gathered for a meal and the leftovers were taken to those in need. St Paul chastised some of the communities for getting drunk and eating too much but there is no complaint about the music or their ability to rejoice.

The psalmist sings: *The Lord is King, let the earth rejoice.* The psalmist is acknowledging the place of God in his life. God is the king, God is the center of his life, God is his reason for being and as such he not only wants to rejoice but he wants to see the whole earth rejoice. He looks around and sees the beauty of the earth, the clouds and darkness the lightening as part and parcel of the presence of God. Perhaps it was because they were living in tents in the desert areas and were much closer to nature that they had a greater appreciation for the rain and a more conscious awareness of the presence of God in nature.

What does it mean to rejoice in the Lord? For some it seems to be a wonderful sense of God's presence in everything. They sing God's praises

all day and see God at work in everything that happens regardless of what it may be. Then there are those who seem to rejoice in the Lord and at the same time are so judgmental that their negativity diminishes the praise they are giving to God.

What then does it mean to rejoice in the Lord? Does it mean to be singing God's praises all day? Does it mean to have a permanent smile on one's face? Does it mean to be in denial of pain and hurt and the injustice that we see around us? Does it mean that we read nothing but the bible? Does it mean that we become blissfully ignorant of reality? While that may be what we see in some of our fellow Christians, it is not the meaning of "rejoice" that is expounded by the psalmist.

The psalmist says, *Light has sprung up for the righteous and joyful gladness for those who are truehearted.* Joyful gladness. For the psalmist it is not enough to be joyful or be glad but we have to have *Joyful gladness*. His sense of God is such that he does not seem to be able to contain his joy into one word, he had to be explicit that it is *joyful gladness*

Zion hears and is glad, and the cities of Judah rejoice, because of our judgments, O Lord. There is, unfortunately, little rejoicing in the Middle East today. It's a world torn apart by those who would drain it of its natural resources and leave the natives in an empty desert. The hills are alive with the sound of gunfire, as some of the native people have no home but the mountains. And yet in the midst of the pain and sorrow there is joy; people still attend Church, Synagogue and Mosque. Despite the pain of so much suffering people continue to rejoice with the birth of a child, the dedication of a child to God, and the wedding celebration of those in love.

As the psalmist pointed out *Clouds and darkness are round about God, decency and justice are the foundations of God's throne.* In other words, in the midst of all the darkness, there is God.

In the Bible there is almost one hundred and forty references using the word 'rejoice', and thirty-eight of them can be found in the book of psalms. *Serve the Lord with fear and **rejoice** with trembling...Those who love your name may **rejoice** in you... **Rejoice** in the Lord and be glad, you righteous; sing.... In God our hearts **rejoice**, for we trust God's holy word....Let the afflicted hear and **rejoice**....may all who seek you **rejoice** and be glad in you.... may the righteous be glad and **rejoice** before God....They **rejoice** in your name all day long.... Let the heavens **rejoice**, let the earth be glad.... let the hearts of those who seek the Lord **rejoice**...The upright see and **rejoice**....Let Israel **rejoice** in their Maker....Let the saints **rejoice** in this honor and sing for joy.*

It would seem that the psalmist, consciously aware of all the pain of war and warfare, the pain of injustice all around him, still finds time to rejoice in the Lord; finds reasons for rejoicing in his God.

Two thousand and more years later we find ourselves in a world where there is war and rumors of war, where injustice abounds, where we are more consciously and visibly aware of the pain of the world not just our immediate world, but also the global community. Much of our headline news is about one disaster or another; of mass murders and suicides, of the death of soldiers and of innocent bystanders. And yet, in the midst of this depressing news, we rejoice about the same simple things of life; the birth of a child;

the dedication of a child to God, the marriage of a couple in love. In the midst of darkness there is reason to rejoice. In the midst of darkness there is God. *Let us rejoice in the Lord and be glad.*

To rejoice in the Lord means to be alive with every fiber of our being. To rejoice in the Lord means that we are consciously aware of the presence of God in all aspects of our daily life. To rejoice in the Lord means to be consciously aware of injustice and doing the best we can to make our part of the world a place of justice. To rejoice in the Lord always is to be consciously aware of our gifts, talents and our limitations and know that at all times, no matter what is happening, no matter how evil, God is with us. *Rejoice in the Lord, all you decent people and give thanks to God's holy name.*