

The Fragments of Joy

This Sunday is called by different names by different people. Some people refer to this as “Stirrup Sunday”, from the opening words of the collect: “Stir up, we beseech Thee, O Lord, the will of Thy faithful people....” The Prayer Book calls this, the final service of the church year, in typically Anglican understatement, “The Sunday next before Advent”. I think of it as “Gathering Up Sunday”, from our Lord’s command, after the feeding of the five thousand: “Gather up the fragments that remain, that nothing be lost.” (St. John 6:12)

The closer we get to Christmas it seems, the more we remember things from the past; and among these memories are some happy times and some joyful times, going back all the way to our childhood, to our early years, long ago and far away. Fragments of memories of joyful times. I believe that these fragments of joy, scattered through our lives, are among the fragments that our Lord gathers up. I think it is part of the great harvest, the great gathering up. Now, if you can stay awake that long in these comfortable pews, I want to mention four reasons why I think these happy memories of life will be gathered up by our Lord.

First of all, as someone has said, joy is a characteristic of the Christian faith. The first message to the shepherds was, “Behold, I bring you good tidings of a great joy, which shall be to all people.” And we respond to this by singing, “Joy to the world, the Lord has come.” The Epistle to the Hebrews records that as our Lord prepared for the climax of His ministry, as He faced the cross, “For the joy that was set before Him, He endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down on the right hand of the throne of God.” “For the joy that was set before Him.” Joy is not something tacked on to the end of the Christian faith; joy is part of the heart of the Christian faith and the Christian life.

Secondly, joy is a gift of our Lord. On the night before His crucifixion, as He met with His disciples for the last time in the upper room, He said to them, “My joy I leave with you, that your joy may be full.” My joy I leave to you, because joy is His gift to His people. C.S. Lewis says that God has created all the happiness there is, and man’s sin is to think that he can invent a happiness that God has not made. Joy is our Lord’s gift to us just as much as that meal He served to the five thousand. He took five loaves and two small fishes and fed five thousand people, and they gathered up twelve baskets full of the remains from that feast that He had given. “Gather up the fragments, so that nothing be lost.” His joy is also His gift, that He distributes to His people, and the fragments of that joy, I believe, are part of what He gathers up.

So, He is not only the Giver of all happiness and joy, He also is the final culmination of God’s plan of redemption. In one of the clearest statements of the Lord in His majesty, St. Paul, writing to the Christians in Colossae—and what St. John says in the first chapter of his Gospel is in close harmony with what St. Paul says here. “Now Christ is the visible expression of the invisible God. He existed before creation began, for it was through Him that everything was made, whether spiritual or material seen or unseen Through Him, and for Him, also, were created power and dominion, ownership and authority. In fact, every single thing was created

through, and for, Him. He is both the first principle and the upholding principle of the whole scheme of creation. And now He is the head of the body which is the Church. Life from nothing began through Him, and life from the dead began through Him, and He is, therefore, justly called the Lord of all. It was in Him that the full nature of God chose to live, and through Him God planned to reconcile in His own Person, as it were, everything on earth and everything in Heaven by virtue of the sacrifice of the cross.” (Colossians 1:15–20, J.B.. Phillips Translation). He is the first principle and upholding principle of all Creation. And He is also the One who reconciles – that is, who draws it all together. And among those things He draws together, I believe, are the fragments of joy that are part of our lives.

First of all, joy is at the heart of the Christian faith. Secondly, joy is Christ’s gift to His people. Thirdly, Christ is Himself the culmination of all of His gifts and the drawing together of all of creation, including your moments of joy. And, fourth, that drawing together has already begun. This fourth point is sort of hard to explain. So, if you will all take a deep breath and sit up straight, we will go through this one, and that will be it. Joy is part of eternity, and eternity is different from the world we live in. We live in what is called a temporal world. It has a past, and a present, and a future. And that’s hard enough to deal with, without talking about eternity. All day Friday this week seemed like Saturday, and Saturday seemed like Monday. I have enough, trying to deal with the temporal world. And that, I think, is why the Lord created time, because that is easier to deal with than eternity. In eternity, the past and the future are all gathered together in the eternal present. In eternity, your future has already happened, and that just boggles my mind. I cannot contend with it. It is a little easier to understand that in eternity, the past is already a part of the present. It has already been gathered up. The joys that to us are long ago and far away, they are not lost. They are already gathered up in eternity, waiting for you.

Alleluia, not as orphans are we left in sorrow now.

Alleluia, He is near us. Faith believes nor questions how.

And we have a part in this gathering up. Our Lord commands us, “Gather up the fragments, that nothing be lost.” Gather up all the fragments of joy. And give thanks to Him.. Treasure those fragments, because they are not lost. They are part of His eternity. And give thanks to Him. And share the joys, because in sharing them they become greater. And give thanks to Him, who created all joy, who gives all joy, and He gathers up the fragments, so that nothing, not one part, is lost.

A Sermon preached at All Saints’ Church, Pensacola, Florida, on The Sunday Next Before Advent, 26 November 2000 by The Rev. Hugh Hall.

