

## Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time A - On Being a Joyful Christian

July 9, 2023.

I want to begin today with a laughable story about a truck driver named Darrell Loomis. Darrell always stopped for meals at his usual Joe's diner in the middle of his route between Manitoba and Alberta. One day, he was sitting in his favourite counter-seat eating his usual lunch - meat loaf, mashed potatoes, and ice tea. Suddenly he heard a roar outside and saw a cloud of dust, followed by the arrival of twelve members of a motorcycle gang, riding Harley-Davidsons with extended forks. These were fine bikes, quite a sight to see as the gang parked them next to Darrell's huge Peterbilt truck. As the gang stomped into the diner, the leader spotted Darrell. "Well, who is this little wimp at the counter?" he sneered. Forming a semicircle around Darrell, the gang members started snapping their fingers in rhythmic cadence. Unperturbed, Darrell just sat and ate his lunch. One of them poured Darrell's ice tea over his head. Others watched, still snapping their fingers in unison. With his napkin, Darrell quietly dried his face, but said nothing. Another one stuck a finger full of the mashed potatoes into Darrell's ear, wiping his hand on Darrell's back. Darrell just calmly finished his lunch as they continued to taunt him, paid his bill and left the diner without saying a word. The gang leader laughed and said to diner owner "What a wimp! That guy sure ain't much of a man!" Joe, looking out the window said, "And he ain't much of a driver either. He just locked down and ran over twelve Harleys."

I can get away with that joke. There is nothing wrong with an occasional laugh in church. There are some people who do not agree with this. We all know many Catholics who are so sullen that you wonder why they would want to be Catholic if they could not be joyful. It is true that it is a blessing in our faith that clergies are not constrained in their preaching by concerns of job security. We are not afraid to proclaim that which might not be popular. However, it appears that preaching about negative things, the bad news, has become more prevalent than preaching about the positive, the good news. Clergies have plenty of ammunition to be negative. Some parishioners in other parishes said all they heard are negative sermons. They often leave Mass feeling down about themselves and about society. For them Christianity is not joyful, but a somber burden inflicted upon them. Jesus Christ did not come to berate us. He came to give us rest. When we look at the New Testament, the Christian scriptures and study the lives of the saints, the Good News is always joyful.

Consider this Sunday's readings. The Gospel (Matthew 11:25-30) tells us to be united to the Lord, to turn our burdens over to him and to allow him to refresh us. The reading says that our souls will find rest for his yoke is easy and his burden is light. Jesus says, **"Give me all your problems and all your concerns, your many difficulties and trust me."** We need to turn everything over to the Lord: our feelings of being overwhelmed with financial burdens, the down times in our relationships, the boring aspects of our jobs, our continual concern for our parents or our children or our own health. We need to turn it all over to the Lord and be at peace. We need to have faith that no matter what happens, if we have union with the Lord, **"All shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well."** as Julian of Norwich, the mystic of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century said. The first reading, from the prophet Zechariah (9:9-10), tells us to rejoice because the Saviour has come. God is not far away from us. He is right here, in our hearts. The saints, even the martyrs, especially the martyrs, were people of joy. It is said that the martyrs marched into the Coliseum singing. No matter what happened to them, they died at peace. St. Ignatius of Antioch, who lived from 32 to 120 AD, was the bishop of what was at that time the second largest city in the Roman Empire. He was honoured and respected and he set a good example of how to be a joyful martyr. He wrote to the various Christian communities to be strong and courageous in the faith. When Ignatius was quite elderly, he was arrested and found guilty of being a Christian, and sentenced to be killed by the wild animals in the Colosseum in Rome. In Ignatius's own words, given in a letter that he wrote to Smyrna while on his death march, he said, "...nearness to the sword is nearness to God; to be among the wild beasts is to be in the arms of God; only let it be in the name of Jesus Christ. I endure all things that I may suffer together with him, since he who became perfect man strengthens me." What an attitude! He valued it a gift to be allowed to suffer as a Christian. He pleaded that he be allowed to die in joy.

In the Gospel, with his disciples around him, Jesus encouraged them by sharing with them, in prayer, the joy he found in the relationship with his Father that was his very life. The themes of the Scriptures heard in the synagogue, must often have found an echo in the prayer of Jesus. This passage brings out something we could easily overlook, as we ask ourselves how Jesus formed his disciples and prepared them to take up the great mission to which he was calling them. By sharing his prayer with them, he teaches them the great truths they must announce to the world - the mystery of his relationship with his Father; the strength he found in that relationship, how he made his whole life an expression of the ways of the Father. In the remarkable moment of prayer remembered in this gospel, Jesus is filled with joy and gratitude that the Father gives a privileged place to the 'little ones' who have been the first concern of his ministry. It is the simple people who have kept the faith of Israel alive, and who will carry on his mission down through the ages. As the disciples share in his prayer, he helps them to 'know' the Father. In the language of the Scriptures, let us recall, this word means far more than gathering information. It implies a sharing of life that brings the joys and security of true friendship. It was in his prayer that they came to know the intimacy with the Father that he expressed in the word, Abba, when addressing his Father. We know from St Paul, that the first Christians adopted this same form of address to the eternal Father (see Gal 4:6). As they recalled that he taught them to begin their prayer, 'Our Father', memories of the prayer he had shared with them must have given a greater depth to their personal prayer.

Brothers and sisters, both Paul and John tell us we should make the Saviour the model of our Christian life. He was himself the perfect embodiment of the life to which God's faithful people are called. In the time of Jesus, the rabbis spoke of the Law as God's 'yoke'. The Saviour assures that if we try to live as he would live, the 'yoke' of New Law he brings is 'easy and light'. We believe that God became one of us to join us in our turmoil so he could lead us to the joy of his peace. "But you might say. "You have no idea of the grief I have. A loved one has died recently. Am I not to grieve, not to cry?" No, grieve, cry. That is a sign of the love you have. No one cries over the death of someone they did not love. But remember, in your grief and your inner turmoil, remember that the life of your loved one is transformed, not ended. Mourn him or her here, but know that your loved one is in the peace and love of Jesus Christ. Even in sorrow we Christians have fundamental joy. The Lord says, "Come to me all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burden, and I will give you rest." Jesus is always inviting us to come to him with our worries saying all will be well. This giving of our hearts to Jesus needs complete trust and childlike dependence which we seem to have lost growing up. We lost our paradise of childhood innocence, putting our reliance on our material possessions and worldly desires, as a result, it is difficult to cast our cares upon the Lord. We need humility to trust and lay our burden to the Lord who is full of mercy and compassion. God wants nothing more than our joy in union with Him through His son, Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour. Yes, we commemorate the Passion of the Lord solemnly during Lent. But the tears of Good Friday magnify the joy of Easter Sunday. We are the Easter people, filled with the joy of the Risen Lord. Death has been defeated by eternal life. We should not be so somber, so serious, so negative, so out and out gloomy. Maybe some of us, beginning with clergies, need this reminder: **if your heart is filled with the joy of the Lord, kindly inform your face.** I remember speaking to a young man who told me that he had stopped worshipping because his life was not unfolding as he had planned. He did something that many people do with little repercussion. Only, in his case, he was caught and his whole life was changed. "Why did God let this happen?" he protested. In his anger he stopped praying. I asked him a simple question, "When were you happier, when you had God in your heart or when you went your own way?" He thought for a while, and then said something to me that I have heard many of our young people say, "I want to be who I was, not who I am becoming. I want to be happy again." The presence of the Lord brings joy, peace and refreshment to the soul. God bless you all.

