

Communion

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 04 November 2007

Preacher: Fergus MacDonald

[0 : 00] I'd like you now to turn to the Old Testament version of that psalm we've just sung, Psalm 126, which is on page 623 of the Pew Bible.

Psalm 126, and particularly the words at the end of verse 3, The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy.

We are filled with joy. This is a psalm which is full of images, verbal images, full of metaphors, full of figures of speech.

This psalm is not alone in that many of the psalms have very vivid language. I think it is important for us to take in these word pictures and to allow them to stretch our imagination.

In the psalm we have the metaphors of dreams, of streams, and of sowing and of reaping. When we study scripture, I think it is important for us to allow these verbal images to impact our imagination, so that we are able to absorb them, and that we think not simply of what they mean, but first of all, think, just imagine the situation, imagine the scene that is being painted before us.

[1 : 48] God's word addresses us at every level of our personality, and it addresses our imagination as much as it addresses our mind and our will.

Now this verse, at the end of verse 3, verse 3b, We are filled with joy, is the central verse of the psalm. Now the psalms are not only spiritual, they're also artistic, and they are poetic and are structured in a way which is meant to not only capture our imagination, but to communicate a key message to us.

And very often the line in the psalm, which is at the very centre in the original language, has a key message, that is, if you like, the axle around which the psalm revolves.

And the axle of this psalm is this verse, We are filled with joy. And today we are gathered not only around God's word, but we are also gathered around God's table, in which there are symbols of the death of the Lord Jesus, the symbols of bread and wine.

The bread will be broken, the wine will be poured out, as a reminder of what the Lord Jesus Christ has done for us on the cross of Calvary.

[3 : 21] And this is an occasion, it's a serious occasion, it's a solemn occasion, it's an occasion of awe, but it is also an occasion of joy. An occasion when we celebrate the victory that the Lord Jesus Christ wrought upon the cross.

As we look back, we give thanks for the victory. There are memorials to past wars throughout this country. And these memorials are reminders of the victory that was wrought by this country in association with others in the two world wars.

If you go to Germany, or if you go to some, or Italy, countries which were defeated, war memorials have a different message.

I remember once visiting a German cemetery in Denmark. It was a local cemetery, but there was a section of it which was given over to the burial of German soldiers.

And I thought how different must be the reaction of a relative today coming to visit the grave of a loved one. To respect them, yes, but to look back, not at a victory, but at a defeat.

[4 : 50] Now as we look back to Calvary, we look back to a victory. We look back to Christ triumphing over the principalities and powers. And we've every reason to rejoice.

We've every reason to give God thanks. Traditionally, the Lord's Supper has been called the Eucharist. The Eucharist is one of these Greek words which has been borrowed by the English language and many other languages, many other modern languages.

It means basically thanksgiving. And this is an occasion of thanksgiving, when we give God thanks for what he has done for us.

And there's a very real sense in which we celebrate the essence of the gospel today. Because the gospel concerns not what we do, but what God does, what God has done, what he is doing today, and what he will yet do.

And our part is simply to say thanks. And when we come to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, that's precisely what we do. We simply give thanks.

[6 : 03] God has done it all. God has wrought our salvation. Christ has accomplished our redemption. Our responsibility, our role, is simply to say thank you.

And that's precisely what we are invited to do as we gather around the table of the Lord today. Now this psalm is a psalm which some people describe as a psalm of reorientation.

A well-known American scholar, Walter Brueggemann, has divided the psalms into psalms of orientation, psalms of disorientation, and psalms of reorientation. And many of the psalms are psalms of disorientation.

They are called laments. They are more laments in the Psalter than any other type of psalm. And it's important for us to remember that, that it is right for us to lament before God.

It is right for us to confess our frustrations, to confess our failures, to confess our weaknesses before God.

[7 : 16] We live in an age of hype. And we need to recognize that there is a place, a rightful place before God, even to present our anger to him, to present our protest to God.

There's a lot of protestation in these psalms of lament. But the psalm today is not a psalm of protest. It is not a lament. It is a psalm of thanksgiving.

It is a psalm of reorientation. Because it is a psalm which was almost certainly composed when the people of Israel returned from exile in Babylon.

They had lived there for a long period of time. At least two generations had lived there. And they were disillusioned.

They said in Psalm 137, how can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? They had many problems, many, many, many frustrations. But then the decree of Cyrus was given them, I think 536.

[8 : 19] And the people were allowed to return to their own land. And this is a song of thanksgiving for having returned to their land.

And they recognized it was God who did this. It was God who made the difference. One moment they were there in Babylon with no hope of returning to their land. The next, Cyrus, defeated the Babylonians and he set not only the Israelites but all the other captive peoples free.

And here the people of God recognized that this was God's intervention. This was divine intervention in the situation. Completely unforeseen, unexpected, unexpected, but God did it.

And it's important for us when we recognize that God can do that. That God can intervene in history. I know that today we have many people who project trends into the future.

And there is a place for looking at the future like that. But we must always as Christians take into account that God may do something different. That God can intervene. And that God has intervened.

[9 : 29] And we need to pray and to expect that God will intervene in a way which we cannot predict, in a way which we cannot extrapolate from the past.

God is the God of history. God is the God who can intervene. And so this psalm is a psalm of thanksgiving. It is a psalm of joy.

The trauma of the exile was over. A long period of disorientation is now in the past. And it is through songs such as this that the believing community finds its reorientation.

But this psalm is not only a psalm that was originally sung in a specific historical situation. It is also a psalm which was sung regularly for centuries during the festivals in Jerusalem.

Three times in the year the people went up to Jerusalem to celebrate a great festival. And this psalm, this psalm is one of these psalms that's called a Song of Ascent.

[10 : 39] There's a whole series of songs of ascent from Psalm 120 onwards. And the term, the word ascent in the title is most scholars would interpret it as referring to the people going up to Jerusalem.

They were ascending. Jerusalem was built on a hilltop and the people talked of going up to Jerusalem. And these were songs of ascent, perhaps songs that they sung as they journeyed.

Because in these days they walked, most people walked. And as they walked, they sung. And no doubt as they entered the temple, they also sung. In fact, some scholars think that the ascents were in fact the steps going up into the court of the people.

Each court was higher than the other. And you went up into the court of the Lord. Now, this psalm, therefore, has got this association not only with the exile, but also with the festivals of the Old Testament.

Now, today, we are gathered around the table of the Lord, which fulfills all of these festivals. The festivals, these three great festivals, and there were more than three, but there were three great festivals in the Old Testament.

[12 : 03] One was the Passover. And Paul tells us that Jesus is our Passover. And the Lord's Supper is what the Passover pointed to, pointed to the death of the Lord Jesus.

And what the festival that we have today, which corresponds to the festival of the Passover, indeed, the other two festivals as well, is the festival of the Lord's Supper.

Now, this is a festival. The festival is a time of rejoicing. It is a time of thanksgiving. It is a time when we are filled with joy.

And so, we are invited today to rejoice and to use the words of this psalm as a means of expressing our rejoicing in the Lord.

How do the people rejoice? Well, first of all, the rejoicing is built on their past, on the past experience. The Lord has done great things for us, we read in the third verse.

[13 : 13] The Lord has done great things for us. He's delivered us. He's brought us home. It's interesting how this verse, the verse of our text, which is in the dead center of the psalm, which is the axle of the psalm, that all the verbs before this verse are in the past tense.

And all the verbs following it are in the present, are rendered in the present, or in the future. And so, in the first part of the psalm, there is this retrospective focus.

There's this looking back, looking back to what the Lord had done for his people. And today, as we gather at the table of the Lord, we first of all look back.

We look back to Calvary. We look back to that key event, which is the axle of history, where the Lord Jesus Christ became man, the Son of God became man, and he lived his life, and offered his life as a sacrifice for our sins.

He rose again from the dead and ascended to the Father's right hand. That is the axle of all human history, not just the history of the Church. That is the axle of the history of the universe.

[14 : 33] That is the key defining event in the drama of redemption. We look back to that event.

The Lord has done great things for us. It is important for us to look back because we also have been in exile.

We also have been estranged. We also have been alienated. We also have been captive. And what this psalm reminds us of in the light of the New Testament is that God has delivered us from that alienation.

God has delivered us from that captivity. God has set us free from the bondage of sin. Jesus entered into our alienation.

He entered into our abandonment. He entered into our lostness. And he absorbed in himself the judgment that we incurred.

[15 : 43] So he is the one to whom we give thanks because he has done great things for us. He has borne our iniquities.

He has carried our sorrows. He was wounded for our transgressions. He is the one who has carried the can, if you like, for us.

He has borne the consequences of our sin. And that's what we remember today. That's why the bread is broken. That's why the wine is poured out. A reminder that his body was broken upon the cross and his blood was shed.

A reminder that he died not only in a physical sense, but in a spiritual sense, because he entered into our abandonment. He cried out upon the cross, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? He knew that alienation and he bore it not only for you and for me, but he bore it for millions and millions and millions of men and women.

[16 : 54] And so the alienation which is ours in that multiple form, concentrated form, was absorbed by him and he absorbed it all.

He took it all. He not only paid part of the price of our redemption, he paid it all. He gave his life, as he said to his disciples, as a ransom for many.

And a ransom is a price which is paid in order that a prisoner might be set free. Those of you who may have visited Peru at some time, may have been to the town, the city of Cajamarca in the north of Peru, where the free church has had mission work for many years.

In that town, there is a room which is called the room of the ransom. It was in that room that the Inca emperor Atahualpa in the 16th century offered to pay a ransom for his release to the Spanish conquistadores.

He said that he would fill that room with gold and he raised his hand and he had a line drawn along the wall and he said, I will fill this room with gold if you will set me free.

[18:19] And he did fill it with gold. But sadly, the Spanish did not set him free and he was put to death. But that room is still there today, the room of the ransom.

And there is a line in the wall, if it is the line that Atahualpa drew or not is perhaps debatable, but there is a line there. And that is the room of the ransom.

Now Jesus paid the ransom. He gave his life for our sins. That's what we remember today. We give God thanks for what he has done for us in the past.

We look back to the place of ransom. We look back to the cross. We look back to the place where Jesus died for our sins. We look back to the place where he accomplished our redemption.

And so we give him thanks for that. The Lord's Supper not only looks back, it also looks forward.

Just as the psalm looks back to deliverance from exile, so it also looks forward to the future, to the new challenges that lay ahead.

[19:31] And the Lord's Supper also invites us not simply to look back, but to look forward. You proclaim the Lord's death, said Paul, to the church in Corinth.

When you celebrate the Lord's Supper, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. And so there is this forward pointing in the Lord's Supper.

We look forward to the day when Jesus Christ will come. And so when we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we not only build on the past, we in a sense borrow from the future, as we anticipate the future, we're borrowing from the future.

And the church is the community of the future, the community of destiny, the community that looks forward to that great day when Jesus Christ will return and when the regeneration of all things will be complete.

The exiles who returned to Jerusalem rejoiced, but they found that in the midst of their rejoicing, there were dangers. We know from the book of Ezra that two years after the return, the foundation for a restored temple was laid amid great scenes of joy and enthusiasm.

[20:54] But we also know from other books, such as the books of Nehemiah and of Haggai, that some of the imperial officials in the neighboring provinces became suspicious and hostile, and opposed the temple rebuilding project, succeeded in halting the work for fourteen years.

We know about Sanballat, we know about Tobiah from the book of Nehemiah. Now, it was not easy for the Jewish returnees, because these people were officials of the emperor, and the emperor was far flung, and some of these officials tended to interpret the decrees of the emperor rather loosely, when they saw that the returning exiles would take away from the authority that they had previously exercised.

And so, the joy that the exiles experienced, that God's past provision was tempered by an awareness of the hostility and power of the colonial officials like Sanballat and Tobiah.

And we also live in a situation of spiritual danger. We live in a fallen world.

The world has not yet been redeemed. We live in a world where the devil goes about as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.

[22:24] We live in a world where the mystery of iniquity is at work. And so, we also will have tribulation. And Jesus reminds us of that fact.

There will be tribulation. And we need to pass through that tribulation. And we need the strength that he alone can give us. So, the joy that the psalm speaks of here is not a joy that is escapism.

It is not an escape from sorrow. And it's important for us to recognize that. Because so often today, the secular concept of joy is to escape.

To escape from harsh reality. To find some new way of living. To go into a new context.

It is trying to eliminate things that hurt. To get rid of pain by numbing our nerve ends. To get rid of insecurity by eliminating risks.

[23 : 29] To get rid of disappointments by depersonalizing our relationships. And we think that we can buy joy in the form of entertainment. In the form of yet another holiday.

Now, the joy that Jesus offers is a much deeper joy than that. It is a joy which you can experience in the midst of tribulation.

It is a joy which you can know in the midst of the hurricanes of life. And that was the joy which the people of God knew when they sang this sound.

They rejoiced in the presence of God. They rejoiced to know that God was with them. They rejoiced to know that God had promised them a future and a hope.

That's what Jeremiah said to the exiles. He said to them before the return, God has given you a future and a hope. And today as we gather at the Lord's table, we are being reminded, God is reminding us that we have a future and a hope.

[24 : 40] And that we are called to be a community of hope, to live as the people of hope in the world in which we live. And so, just as this Sam looks forward to the time of harvest, it brings in the metaphor of sowing and reaping.

So also we are encouraged to believe that there will be a time of harvest. Sowing is hard. Keeping the land free from weeds can also be hard.

But there will be a time of harvest. There will be a time of rejoicing. There will be a time to praise the Lord fully. The book of Revelation reminds us, of course, that there will not only be a harvest of wheat, there will always be a harvest of grapes.

And these two figures in the book of Revelation dramatically present the future. There will be a harvest of wheat, which will be a harvest of believers, the harvest of the people of God.

But there will also be a harvest, a grape harvest, harvest. And that is a symbol in the book of Revelation of the judgment. The judgment of God will fall upon all who do not believe.

[26 : 02] And so the Lord sufferers, in a sense, is also a reminder of the harsh realities of life, the harsh spiritual realities, that there is a judgment, that there is a day when we will all appear before the judgment seat of Christ.

And have to give an account of how we have lived. But today we rejoice in the victory that Christ has wrought and the hope that he has given us concerning the future.

And today we are invited to express that joy by coming to his table, by singing these songs of praise, by blessing one another in the fellowship of the people of God.

And so when we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we build on the past and we also borrow from the future. We look to the future. But of course we live in the present.

And there is a sense in which the present is the frontier between the past and the future. And we are pilgrims moving from the past into the future.

[27 : 19] Just as the people of God who sang the psalm but up to the festivals in Jerusalem singing it. So we are moving across time towards eternity.

We also are pilgrims. It's important for us I think to recognize that a lot of people today say that we're nomads. Now nomad tends to go round and round.

He goes from oasis to oasis. There's no purpose. There's no direction. It's not a journey. It's simply some kind of cyclic existence.

But the concept that we're given in the New Testament and in the Word of God is that we are on a journey. We're not nomads. We're pilgrims. And God has called us to be pilgrims.

It may be that some of you may be living as nomads. You may be going round in circles. And if that is the case then I pray that the message of Word and Sacrament today may speak to you and remind you that life is a journey.

[28 : 26] That life is a pilgrim. That you, whether you recognize it or not, are a pilgrim. That you're moving forward through time towards eternity.

and you're invited today to trust in the Lord and to become his pilgrim, to become his follower, to follow in his footsteps so that in your journey he might become your forerunner.

He might be the one who goes before you. That's what he offers to do, to become the forerunner of his people. He offers to be the one who goes before you into every new day, into every new experience, to prepare the way for you.

He is the one who has promised to be our leader, to be the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. And so we are called today to live by faith.

To live by faith in the Son of God who not only gave himself for us but who has gone ahead of us into the presence of God and who invites us to follow him.

[29 : 36] Last week I was attending some meetings in the city of Dublin. And one of the people attending these meetings when we spoke in our devotional session spoke, used an expression I hadn't heard before but it remained with me.

He said, we need to be hard on the heels of God. we need to follow after him, follow after the Lord Jesus Christ.

He goes before us and he invites us to follow. That's what it means to live by faith in the present, moving from the past into the future, trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Christ. And so today we are reminded that we are pilgrims. We are reminded that we are called upon to live by faith.

And even receiving the bread and receiving the wine, we do so by faith. God communicates his grace to us through the Lord's Supper, not in a mechanical way.

[30 : 46] When Jesus said, this is my body and this is my blood, he was speaking metaphorically. And we lose the essence of what he is saying if we interpret these words literally.

Jesus is inviting us to recognize that there is an element of mystery. That Jesus cannot be boxed into a piece of bread or into a goblet of wine.

They are symbols. And symbols have an element of mystery. God is not only with us, but God is transcendent. God is not someone whom we can captivate.

God is this element of mystery through which we appropriate by faith. And so we are called upon to receive the bread and to receive the wine by faith, believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, renewing our commitment to him and seeking to give him thanks for his goodness to us.

Man's defense is the shorter catechism is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. now as we come to the Lord's table, let us seek to glorify God.

[32 : 05] Let us seek to honor him. Let us seek to praise him and to bless him for all that he has done for us, to stand in awe of his great work of redemption and his purpose for his people, his purpose for the universe, and to marvel that we are part of that purpose, that we have the privilege of being not spectators but participants in it, that he has given us the kingdom.

Let us give him the glory. Let us ascribe to him the praise and exalt him in our midst. Let us also rejoice.

Let us enjoy him today and forever. Let us give him thanks from the very depths of our hearts, for all that he has done, for all that he is, and for all that he has promised yet to do.

Let us bow our heads in prayer. Our heavenly father, as we respond to your word, we thank you for this ancient song that your people have sung and still sing today all over the world throughout all generations.

We bless and we praise you for the way in which it enables us to rejoice and to recognize the purpose for which you have created us and for which you have saved us.

[33 : 32] Help us, O Lord, our God, to build upon what you have done for us and to rejoice that the Lord has done great things for us. And help us at the same time, Lord, to look forward to the harvest, to recognize that although we may sow in tears, yet we will reap joy.

Grant, O God, that we may anticipate that joy today and that we may rejoice in your presence.

Enable us, O Lord, to live by faith. Enable us to stand in the frontier between the past and the present and to move forward as your pilgrims, to be followers of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And again we thank you that he who died for us, rose again for us, and has gone ahead of us into glory. Help us to follow him. Help us to have that sense of being pilgrims.

Grant, O God, that we may be sustained in that pilgrimage today. And we pray also for any among us who may be living as nomads, who may be living life rather aimlessly, not knowing its meaning, not knowing its purpose, wondering what it is all about.

Grant, O God, that today you will reveal yourself to them as the God and Father of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, as the one who said, I am the way, the truth, and the life.

[34 : 57] Grant, O God, that you will speak not only to your people, but speak to those who as yet are not your people, so that today we may proclaim the Lord's death and his resurrection till he come.

We ask these things in and through his name and for his sake. Amen. This psalm which we have looked at is a psalm which reminds us of the importance, as we've said, of becoming the pilgrims, becoming the followers of God.

These were the people who had left Babylon. now, although many people were glad to leave Babylon, there were others who were not. There were some who remained.

And this song could only be sung by those who had left, by those who had gone. What Cyrus in effect said you're free to go, but he also implied that you're free to stay.

And there were many who did stay. today, when we come to the Lord's Table, we're reminded that the Lord's Table is for those who have gone.

[36 : 23] The Lord's Table is for those who have said yes to the Lord Jesus Christ. The Lord's Table is not for all. The Lord's Table is for those who believe, for those who trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

And so if you trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, then you are invited to his table.