

JOY IN RELIGION
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Let us think on the very beginning of our Biblical faith as represented in the Passover celebration, celebrated in that first Easter week. The Jewish Passover is a celebration of liberation, the deliverance of the children of Israel from slavery in Egypt, deliverance by God under the leadership of Moses, a deliverance that led to liberation from the perils of the wilderness to settlement in the promised land flowing with milk and honey. Is not this an occasion for joy? In the tradition of the Passover, religion is a declaration of, a celebration of freedom. And surely freedom from slavery should be celebrated with joy. And so in the ritual of the home celebration of the Seder, the feast, foods symbolic of this great event are eaten and the story is retold. For example, it is asked, "Why is it, on other nights we eat leavened bread, but tonight we eat matzoh, unleavened bread?" And the father responds with the explanation that in the haste of the Exodus, there was no time to prepare leavened bread. Similarly, the symbolic bitter herbs recall the bitterness of the wilderness experience. But through all the celebration it is the quiet but intense joy in the deliverance by God of his people Israel, and the promise of His continued guidance through the covenant God made with His people through Moses. Surely this is an occasion for joy.

And the Christian builds on this old covenant God made with His people. And he shares in the joy of this relationship, a joy expressed in such classic beauty in the tradition we cherish together of the Psalms of David. Hear the spirit of joy in these psalms! "Make a joyful noise to God, all ye lands. Make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation, a joyful noise to Him with psalms. Let the hills be joyful together. In Thy presence is fullness of joy — because of the joy of Thy salvation. They that sow in tears shall reap in joy. And joy cometh in the morning." All nature seems to share in the joy of creative living: "This is my Father's world and to my listening ears all nature sings and around me rings the music of the spheres."

But the Christian has a new covenant with God — not through Moses, but through Christ. As Paul pointed out, Moses gave us the law so that people knew what was right and wrong. But increasingly people displayed an inability to follow the laws of righteousness, so that in effect the law simply convicted men of sin. As Paul put it, "The good that I would do I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do. I delight in the law of God after the inward man. But I see another law in my bodily members fighting against the law that my reason approves, and making me a prisoner under the law that is in my members, the law of sin. The will to do good is there, the deed is not. Miserable creature that I am, who shall deliver me out of the body of this death? — this body doomed to death."

Note the theme of deliverance. And it is Christ who delivers us, says Paul, liberates us from the power of sin, by taking on Himself the burden of our sins, and sharing with us the liberating power of God. It is the confidence, the joy in this deliverance that enabled Paul to spread the new spirit of liberation in a world that seemed defeated by the powers of evil. Paul was preaching liberation from the power of sin, the evils of existence, while the Epicurean religious philosophy

was preaching retreat, withdrawal from the problems, pains and troubles of the world. Paul was preaching liberation, deliverance, and joy while the Stoic religious philosophy was teaching the ethical nobility of still following duty while one endured the sufferings of the evils of this world, with Stoic endurance. Paul was preaching liberation, deliverance, and joy while neo-Platonic Gnostic religion taught the mystical wonder of a spiritual reality and a God unsullied, far removed from this ugly scene of human life. Paul was preaching deliverance, liberation while a desperate Rome was attempting to turn back the clock to a happier, stronger, freer age by measures of terror and repression. No wonder the people heard the good news of liberation with joy!

And this is still the experience of religion. When one's life is touched by God, a new spirit is born; the light of Christ dispels the darkness of sin. The power of God's liberation frees us from bondage to fear, bondage to a sense of inadequacy, to a sense of worthlessness, of bondage to dependencies of the many unworthy kinds that we label bondage to sin. And what a joy it is to be liberated, released from bondage of any kind, from the bondage of ignorance that makes us live in fear to the bondage of a compulsive behavior that makes us want to destroy ourselves or those we love. No one enjoys such slavish existence. No one enjoys drug dependency. No one wants to be an alcoholic — an alcoholic gets to hate the very taste of alcohol. We might wonder at the enduring effect, but we should certainly be able to understand the euphoric sense of joy of the reformed addict turned Charismatic Christian who proclaims he is high on, turned on to Christ. Freedom, liberation, deliverance is a wonderful thing — a joyous experience. And this is what Christian salvation promises.

But deliverance has a dual direction. It is liberation from a lower life of bondage; it is also liberation for a higher life of creative and constructive freedom. And without this sense of a forward-looking goal of commitment, the sense of liberation becomes at best the indulgence of a shallow sentimental feeling — and at worst, a smug and narrow sense of religiosity, that through its own self-satisfaction and judgment of others becomes the occasion of stumbling and sin. This is why the liberally oriented Christian may question the experience of those born-again Christians who never tire of telling how wonderful they feel in being saved. They're rarely as clear about what they are saved for. On the other hand, the vision of the kingdom of God on earth, which the liberal cherishes, the promise of a world in which wrongs are righted, specific ones, where as Micah said, "They shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree, and none shall make them afraid", such a vision of a future liberation cannot be actualized with the experience of God's liberating power here and now — in the joy of religion. The two aspects of deliverance go together: deliverance from bondage and deliverance for creative activity toward the building of the promised land.

It is this spirit which is captured so beautifully by Isaiah in that magnificent sixty-first chapter read in the scripture lesson. Note how it begins — how it must begin — if there be deliverance. "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me because He has anointed me, to bring good news to the humble, bind up the broken hearted, proclaim liberty to the captives, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord; to comfort all that mourn; to give them garlands instead of ashes, oil of joy in place of mourner's tears. Ancient ruins shall be rebuilt, ruined cities restored." And so on. What a magnificent program is set down for the exercise of our creative freedom! But we need the

spirit of God upon us to liberate us from bondage, and for creative and joyous activity in building the promised land, the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

The promise of this spirit is made actual in the good news of the gospel. John points to immediate sorrows, struggles — but the world shall rejoice — and the sorrow be turned to joy. Liberation here is likened to a woman's labor in child-birth: when she is delivered, there is joy in the birth of a new creature. "So it is with you," says Jesus. "Now you are sad at heart, but I shall see you again, and then you will be joyful, and no one can rob you of your joy." No one can take away the joy of the sense of the creative love of God in Christ. It is this which saves us from the troubles we find in the world; it is this which saves us for the vision of peace of God. "Be of good cheer," says Jesus. "I have overcome the world." Rejoice, says our faith, for the love of God is at work in our lives. You must be born again.

Is not this indeed joy, the joy of creative activity? See the wonder and joy of children's activity. It is joy to develop one's God-given talents, to develop our potentiality into actual activity. It is joy to be creative, to achieve. How important it is to like one's job if one is to be happy in one's achievement. How much more important it is to like, nay rather to love, the vision we have of the values we want to achieve in life if we are to be happy. And this positive goal-setting pattern of creative love is the vision of the power of God liberating us to serve and to achieve the highest we know. To live creatively is to live joyously, and this is the spirit of joy in religion. To sense the spirit of God, the love of God in Christ, is to experience the joy in religion. The real response God wants from His love is not the stern sense of duty, but Jesus' ethics of love. So argued Hegel against Kant. For love is the desire to do what duty demands and love reconciles the conflict between desire and duty. Thus duty is transformed in love.

Joy, you see, is the experience of love. Joy is love and love is joy. And we know when we are really caught up in God's love what creative, joyful activity is. We sense it in the work of the church when it is working well in the spirit of Christ. When we have a sense of doing God's will, we have an energizing, not an enervating, sense of life — a zest for living — and this is the power of the Spirit — the love of God. To sense it, to live it, is joy. May each of us find that joy.