

## **Rejoicing in Struggle and in Hope**

### **A Sermon for the Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost (A)**

'Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything. . . .'

All right, how did St. Paul come to be such an optimist?? Where's the apostle we love to hate? The one who harangued and browbeat, wept and worried his way through the fledgling churches of the early Christian world? What does he know that we don't know? What has he been smoking?

So much for my irreverence. . . . Still, one would be hard-pressed to find, among the letters we attribute to him, a more faith-restoring, life-affirming message than the one we read here in Philippians. And he's just getting started! The rest of the letter is even more encouraging, more trusting both in the grace of God and in the assumed goodness of his listeners:

'Beloved,' he says, 'whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.' And, he adds, almost immediately (though he hardly needs to), 'keep doing them!!'

The truth is that, despite our skepticism, Paul seems to know what we're capable of. He seems to appreciate that inside each of us, even in the worst of times, there dwells a desire to do the right thing. Even with all our ambitions and appetites, our doubts and fears, there lives still the conviction that (as the author of Hebrews puts it) we were 'made for better things.'

This probably doesn't mean, however, that things had always been so rosy. It's almost a given with Paul's letters that he's always having to clean something up or dress someone down. His churches were listening to the wrong people. They were starting to hold the stupidest ideas (you knuckle-headed Corinthians, you foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you?!)

And yet for all his frustration, at times all his anger, Paul never, I believe, lost his faith that those who had given themselves to Christ and so had become children in the household of God, would not come round right in the end. This proved to be quite a stretch for him a lot of the time. But he never missed a chance and he surely doesn't

miss it here to bring his fellow believers back to their senses, back to the mind and heart that is in Christ.

So with more a tone of humility (I think) than vain pride, Paul urges them to 'keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.' Maybe that's his way of saying, if I can do it, so can you. So can anyone.

Humble or not, Paul's words might have remained merely a well-intentioned scold were it not for the simple repeated injunction, the simple call that forever enshrines this passage: 'Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.' It's one thing to believe what is right and to do it against all odds, in the face of all resistance. It's quite another gift to be able to do the Godly thing with joy, with a confident and lifted heart.

For reasons I think I know, my thoughts keep returning to the late John Lewis. His voice and vision remain for me the thing that's needed in this hour. In all his long years fighting for racial justice, in the streets and in Congress a fight that all but cost him his life he never allowed himself to lose his power of commitment nor his ability to rejoice. He could recall with gratitude, even a feeling of wonder, the journey that had brought his people and his nation out of darkness, even as he worked tirelessly to shed more and more light upon the path of the present, light that could point us into the future if we allowed it to. 'Sometimes I feel like crying,' he would say, 'tears of happiness, tears of joy, to see the distance we've come and the progress we've made.'

Dear friends, we have come a great distance through many trials and have made great progress, as a society, as a people let no one tell you otherwise. But we have a great distance yet to go. More than that, we have a great decision to make in this season, perhaps the greatest and most consequential decision of our lifetimes. So, it might be easy for us to lose heart, given all that we've seen and are living through, easy to fall into indifference or comfort, easy to bend and break under the weight. Let us avoid that if we can. Somewhere between St. Paul's ancient message to the church in Philippi and John Lewis' enduring message to our own struggling country now and with a wisdom and courage that comes from God there lies, I believe, a hope we can more than just cling to. Rather, it is one we can and should rejoice in, and always. . . . Again I will say, Rejoice! Amen.

Blessings,  
Fr. Gordon +