

Many years ago when I was a teenager, my life was changed by the example of one of my friends. It wasn't that his life was perfect or that he was free from sufferings, but it was clear that he had a joy in his life which I lacked in mine. One night as I was struggling to sleep, I was reflecting on this and realized that the joy in his life came from his relationship with God. His example led me to desire this same relationship with God in my own life which helped set my feet on the path that eventually led me to where I am today.

The Easter season which we are celebrating today is at its heart a season of joy. For over 50 days, 10 days more than the season of Lent, we celebrate the joy of the risen Christ in our lives. We heard this clearly in today's opening prayer which says, "may we celebrate with heartfelt devotion these days of joy, which we keep in honor of the risen Lord, so that what we relive in remembrance [of Him] we may always hold to in what we do." As Christians, we are not called to be dour and bent over by suffering, but rather to be a people of joy. We are called to be an Easter people, and to live out the joy of the risen Christ in all that we do.

We encounter an example of this in today's first reading. There we are told that "with one accord, the crowds paid attention to what was said by Phillip when they heard it and saw the signs he was doing. For unclean spirits, crying out in a loud voice, came out of many possessed people, and many paralyzed and crippled people were cured. There was great joy in that city." Obviously, the healings were a great sign of God's power, but that is not the only sign that Phillip gave. The most important sign which Phillip gave was his joy. The people saw his joy before anything else, and it caught their attention and made them pay attention to his words and deeds. In a very real sense, we can say that Phillip's joy was contagious, so much so that we are told that the entire city was filled with joy and many converted and came to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

Almost all of us here have also received the Holy Spirit, through the sacraments of baptism and confirmation. This means we should all also be filled with Easter joy like Phillip, certain of our Father's love for us. As we heard in today's Gospel, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit among us so that we could know our Father's love, so that we can know that we are in Jesus and that Jesus is in us. This knowledge should fill us with joy! Far too often, however, we find ourselves living in gloom. We mistake Christianity's message that we must face suffering in this life to mean that our lives must be gloomy and morose. The true Christian message is not that our lives are a misery of suffering. No! Instead, the Christian message is that suffering is transformed into joy.

As they say, a sad saint makes for a sorry saint. If you think about it, there is no such thing as the example of a sad, sorry saint. There is no saint like Eeyore from Winnie the Pooh. "Woe is me!" Every saint set before us by the Church is filled with joy. Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati once said, "each day I understand a little better the incomparable grace of being Catholic. Down, then, with all melancholy. That should never find a place except in the heart which has lost all faith. I am joyful. Sorrow is not gloom. Gloom should be banished from the Christian soul." Elsewhere, he says that even in the midst of sorrow "I will always be outwardly joyful, if only to show our friends who do not share our ideas that to be a Catholic means to be young and joyful." We too must learn the great joy of being Christian, the joy of being loved by our God.

Once we discover this joy in our own lives, we are called to go forth and share this joy with others. While we may not be able to cast out demons or heal the sick like Phillip did, we can all witness to the joy God brings to our lives. This witness of joy is the greatest and most important witness that we can give in our lives. If we truly love God and are filled with joy, it will show in everything we do... in our

quiet confidence... in our loving care for those around us... in the way that we accompany others in their suffering. This will be noticed by others and they will start to wonder how they can have this same joy in their own lives. As we heard in our second reading, “always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope, but do it with gentleness and reverence.”

There is no doubt that our world desperately needs the witness of our joy. Think of the many people in our lives who are living without joy: people we encounter on the street, friends at work and school, members of our own families and even people in this parish. So many people in our lives are living without joy, bowed over by the pain in their lives and giving into despair. Christianity offers the only true antidote to this, showing us that we can encounter joy when we pass through the Paschal mystery, through the sufferings in our lives. Suffering is not an obstacle to joy, but is instead a path to encounter our risen Lord and find joy. We have such a gift to offer to our brothers and sisters who lack joy in their lives, and yet we hold back not recognizing the treasure that we have.

We must learn to live a true and authentic joy in our lives, a joy that does not exist because of an absence of sorrow and suffering, but rather a joy which shines through the sorrows in our lives because of the great confidence and love we have in our God who lives within us. If we can do this, we will challenge those around us to rethink what it means to be a Christian. They will see the joy in our lives and desire it for themselves, and through our example they too will come to be filled with the Holy Spirit and the joy that He brings into our lives.