

**‘For everything a season’:  
Theology through the church year  
Session 8: Easter – Choose joy**



*It is a remarkable fact that the great Christian festivals are not distributed throughout the year but take place in the first half and are concentrated on the spring ... This is, in my understanding, a way of showing that with the coming of Christ into this world, his death and resurrection, and the outpouring of the divine Spirit, the spring of eternal life begins for human beings, all living beings, and the earth.*

Jurgen Moltmann, 'Christianity: A Religion of Joy', p. 8

## **This joyful Eastertide**

Joy is the predominant liturgical mood of Eastertide, as we recall the resurrection encounters and stories, and experience the joy of knowing the risen Christ in our midst through worship and especially in the breaking of bread: 'The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord' (Jn. 20.20). This talk explores three features of joy we learn from the Easter story, inspired by the autobiography of C.S Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*.

### **1. Joy: surprising and unexpected**

Joy is something unexpected and surprising. This is implied by the title of Lewis's book (which comes from a poem of the same name by William Wordsworth). Joy is surprising because it is outside of our control - we cannot plan for it. This is what distinguishes joy from pleasure, and makes joy a divine gift: there is an overlap between the word *Chara* (joy) and *Charis* (grace).

Applied to the resurrection encounters, we read of many experiences of joyful surprise: the encounter with Mary Magdalene (Jn. 20: 11-18); the seven disciples by the Sea of Tiberius (Jn. 21: 1-14); the road to Emmaus (Lk. 24:13-35).

Lewis speaks movingly of his conversion to Christianity, saying that even as 'the most reluctant convert in England,' it was an experience of divine joy that brought him to faith. Can the risen Christ still surprise us with joy today, and how?

### **2. Joy: 'a road out of the self'**

Joy always reaches outwards, and is directed towards others and God, not inwardly to our own desires. One way to ruin an experience of joy, Lewis says, is to focus on how it feels to us. Joy, he says, provides a 'road right out of the self'. Moltmann echoes this point: 'you cannot make yourself joyful: that would be self-satisfaction'

Applied to the Easter stories, we can be inspired by the transformation of the disciples, from a disempowered group hiding behind locked doors, to an empowered community, filled with 'great grace', each looking out for the needs of others (Acts 4: 32-35). This transformation comes about through their life of prayer and deep longing for God; the ultimate 'road out of the self'.

*"It is not a question of a good man who died two thousand years ago. It is a living Man ... still as much God as He was when He created the world, really coming and interfering with your very self; killing the old natural self in you and replacing it with the kind of self He has"* (Lewis, *Mere Christianity*)

### **3. Joy: signposts along a difficult path**

Joy, Lewis concludes, is like a 'signpost' that reminds us of the presence of God in the world, and in all stages of our lives. We can look back and remember past joy; we can rejoice in the present but, ultimately, joy is a longing for something further away, or 'about to be'. This means that the process of discovering true joy unfolds over a long period of time, with many setbacks and sorrows along the way.

The journey of Christian discipleship is exactly like this: a journey with struggles, setbacks and challenges; but with signposts of joy that offer a glimpse of the divine and stir us with a deep longing for 'something more'. The joy of the resurrection is incomplete—'while in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering' (Lk 24. 41)—because we long for the redemption and renewal made possible through the resurrection, and notice the gap between the 'now' and the 'not yet'.

### **4. Hope: anticipated joy**

Moltmann stresses that, although 'you cannot make yourself joyful', you can still 'anticipate' joy – and this, he explains, is what we mean by hope. Hope is anticipated joy. In the words of Tom Wright, 'Easter was when Hope in person surprised the whole world by coming forward from the future into the present' (p. 40-41).

**Next talk: Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> May: 'Mind the gap', how 'on earth' should we think about the Ascension?**

#### **References:**

Lewis, C.S *Surprised by Joy* (Geoffrey Bles, 1955)

Moltmann, J. 'Christianity: A religion of joy', available at:

[https://faith.yale.edu/sites/default/files/moltmann\\_christianity\\_a\\_religion\\_of\\_joy.pdf](https://faith.yale.edu/sites/default/files/moltmann_christianity_a_religion_of_joy.pdf)

Wright, N.T *Surprised by Hope* (SPCK, 2011)