

# Sermons at Christ Church

## The Joy of the Lord is Our Strength

Lent III

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Watch out that you do not fall. Says Paul. Take heed that you might not be deceived by self-justification. Repent with the belief that I AM-the Gardener, has given you another shot at life. There's a story of a priest who went out to visit an old parishioner. When he arrived, the old lady invited him to sit. As he sat down, he asked the old lady what she was drinking. The old lady who was holding a glass held it up and said to the priest, I am drinking whiskey but check out my routine. For better digestion, I drink beer. In case of appetite loss, I drink white wine. In case of low blood pressure, I drink red wine. In the case of high blood pressure, I drink scotch. And when I have a cold, I drink schnapps. When do you ever drink water? Asked the bewildered priest. Well, because I have never been that sick. She responded. Yes, indeed, she has never been that sick, how could she? This old lady seemed to have had a solution for every medical problem. In much the same way we also seem to have a solution for all our problems-especially when we feel separated and alienated from God.

The feeling of being separated from God makes us lose that presence of mind which alerts us about being on the wrong path. More crucially, the fact that our errors seem to go unpunished creates a false sense of superiority amidst our own feelings of self-justification. The cancer that afflicts us and the terminal illness of a loved one raises questions. The cyclone which has caused so much devastation in Mozambique raises questions. The massacre in Christchurch raises even more questions.

The tornado which devastated an entire town in Alabama also raises questions. Although we may not have answers to these questions, we readily point to those suffering from some misfortune as feeling the effect of their wrong doing, and then point to our good fortune as evidence of our justification. That seems to be the point of those who were with Jesus. Some are suffering because of what they have done, but we are not suffering because we haven't done anything to warrant any kind of suffering.

Jesus rejects that kind of equivocation because it creates the impression of selective justice. But God isn't in the business of selective justice because he causes His sun to shine on both the righteous and the sinner, God is in the business of offering mercy to those who repent and those who have not because there's always

that possibility. God is in the business of freeing us from the bondage of sin, and offering us- the fig tree another shot at life.

In fact, Paul cautions that church in Corinth to take heed, be responsible for your own spirituality, and do not think too little or too much of yourselves in compassion with others. And he throws in this line “So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall.” Self-justification. The kind of attitude which deceives us into believing that another’s misfortune is deserved, much as our good fortune, whatever it is, is also deserved. Be ye mindful, repent for your station in life is not about what you-what you have done or not done, but it is because I Am-the Gardener, desires to give you another shot.

Last week at our Adult Forum, Prof Fossarelli, in her presentation about Sin, provided the Greek description of sin as missing the mark-more like an archer who shoots an arrow at a target. We know where we ought to be. We know whose it is we are. We know where our sustenance comes from. Like the psalmist who eloquently acknowledges dependence on God’s mercy and writes-“My soul clings to you” he says, “Your right hand upholds me.” We know, and yet we still miss the mark.

As Christians we know that to be wholly conformed to Christ is a long, tortuous and difficult process, one that is not fully accomplished in our life time. The more we strive to be like Christ, the more we become aware of how far we have to go, how mixed our motives are, how full of self-deception we are and even how hard it is to repent of some of our sins. But we are the people of the way because we know the Gardener doesn’t give up on us so long as we do not give up on ourselves.

There’s a story of Rose Macaulay, who was a well-known English novelist and had a long and happy affair with a married man. Upon the death of the man, Rose slowly recovered her lost faith, and began writing letters to an Anglican priest. In her book, *Letters to a Friend*, she describes her repentance and reorientation. She writes:

“I told you once that I couldn’t really regret the past. But now I do regret it, very much.

It’s as if absolution and communion and prayer let us through into a place where we get a horribly clear view-a new view-so that we see all the waste, and the cost of it, and how its roots struck deep down into the earth, poisoning the springs of our own lives and other people’s. Such waste, such cost in human and spiritual values....Not all the long years of happiness together, of love and friendship and almost perfect companionship (in spite of its background) was worthwhile, it cost too much, to us and to other people. I didn’t know that before, but I do now....If only I had refused, and gone on refusing...I see now why belief in God fades away and has to go, while one is leading a life one knows to be wrong. The two can’t live together. It does not give even intellectual acceptance a chance. Now it has a chance....After what has

occurred to me lately, I know there's a personal relationship with God." The power of repentance, the power of making a turn, the Greeks called it metanoia, not a ninety degree, two hundred and seventy degree or three hundred degree turn, but a one hundred and eighty degree turn.

The power of regret, or repentance recognizes the value of a personal relationship with God. And those who come upon this realization know they simply cannot hold together their belief in God and a life they know to be wrong, nor can they thrive on self-justification. Those who chance upon this idea know of a future possibly lived better than the past.

The point of Rose's story is not to court our sympathy, and to lift up for our consideration, not only the evil that she had done but the point of being a fig tree who has been offered another shot at life-not because of anything in particular that the fig tree did or did not do, but because the gardener refuses to give up on her. The gardener desires to throw a lifeline to the fig tree than to cut it down. I AM desires to set free a people who don't even know his name. The point then is not whether you are free or not, but whether you know your station in life, and whether that permits you to have a personal relationship with God. Do you ever feel that the gardener has given up on you? Maybe that's how the people of Israel felt. They had been enslaved for so long that they had either forgotten about the gardener or had distant memories of who the gardener was and what He was capable of doing. Listen to Moses inquire about the gardener, look we don't know you, and when I tell them about you, and they ask me your name, what should I say your name is? Who are you? Moses seem to be asking.

When I met myself, you revealed myself to me for I did not know myself. And you revealed yourself to me, even in the thick of a burning bush. Your desire was not for me to die but to approach the holy, the sacred, to take off that which separates my feet from the earthiness which is my core, my identity. You invited me to come as I am. For your desire is for me to live, your power isn't designed to consume me but to refine me and offer me a new purpose. One that takes me away from herding livestock to being led by you out of the burden of slavery into freedom. A purpose that shifted my attention away from the things that I cannot control to the things that I can control. I can control the good I do. I can control how I respond to evil. I can set aside the things that I cannot understand or control and simply resolve to live my best life. And my best life is a future life lived better than the past. A future life designed by the mercy of I AM-the one Gardener that I know. Amen.