



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Title: **"Be Happy!"**
Comment: Insert Comment here
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Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Zephaniah 3:14-20
Second Reading Philippians 4:4-7
Gospel Luke 3:7-18

"I just want you to be happy." The eternal mantra of the self-sacrificing mother, or long-suffering spouse- an attempt to make being an underdog something noble in its denial of selfish motives. It is so subject to abuse and trivializing that it may come as a surprise, or disappointment, to hear it in the context of Holy Scripture. Our Lord himself seems to be using it in the Beatitudes where the original Greek of "*blessed* are the poor in spirit" actually suggests that they should be *happy...* along with the peacemakers and those who mourn. Nice thought, but not a very conventional way of considering happiness.

It may come as another surprise to learn that when the Archangel Gabriel breaks in on the Virgin Mary to give her the lab results, his first word to her in Greek, *χαίρει*, is not so much "Hail!", as "I want you to be *happy*, Mary." Some might question just how she could work herself up to 'happy' at the prospect of being an unwed mother of a lower-income carpenter giving birth to the Son of God. But Gabriel's greeting is not meant only for her, but for the whole world as it experiences through her God's definitive act in relationship to his creatures. "Be happy" is not the same as "Don't worry", whatever the reggae song said. Happy may be where you get to after a lot of sweat and tears...and worry may definitely have to be a part of that. It is human to worry, because we are never sure that we have done the right thing, or done enough of the right thing, to merit God's approval.

Some preachers will tell you that our Christian faith says that we don't have to worry about anything because all we need to do is to say we believe in Jesus as our personal savior and everything will be all right. But those who have been through real troubles in their lives, real tragedies, and real faith-shaking challenges know that nothing is that simple- even our relationship with Jesus. God expects much more from us than pieties- rote religious sayings that we

expect to work like magic charms, but which can never take us to that higher, or deeper level of commitment and participation in God through the savior, Jesus Christ.

St Paul in his letter to the Philippians also wants us to "Be happy." We hear "Rejoice in the Lord always" but it sounds old-fashioned and stilted, just like "Hail, Mary!" which is that same Greek word again! We don't "rejoice" anymore- we party, we sing, we dance, we feel good. Paul is hardly a good example of a party animal, yet when he tells us to "be happy" in the Lord he is speaking from personal experience. He is happy when God is working through him. "When I really live," he writes, "it is not I but the grace of God in me." In other words, it's a wonderful feeling just to let God get on with it. Paul "participates" in God's work and it satisfies him, it makes him happy. It's not that Paul is saying that he's now just the best little boy in the world- not at all! He is fully aware that he was a stuck-up, close-minded legalist, standing on the laws and canons of his religion, while at the same time being a fierce *persecutor* of the very Christian faith he now champions. But he now knows that he has given himself over to God's will, God's plan and God's power, and therefore worry doesn't bother him. Not now. Not anymore. And the great relief that Paul feels prompts him not to *pride*, but to *thanksgiving*. He knows that he has

fallen short, as we all have fallen terribly short of God's will for us. But Paul looks back at the second, third and thousandth chance that he's been given and his response is "I'm finally happy- thank you God!"

The same God who expects great things from us after we return to him from the wasteland of our squandered dreams and illusions also *wants* us to be happy, and He in turn wants to be *happy for us*. That may be a strange thing to say when we are so often reminded in Scripture about him as a figure of judgment and disappointment. He never seems quite satisfied, and we might wonder if even our best efforts and our most sincere faith actually please him.

To address this, I will close by looking at our first lesson this morning. This is the only passage we ever hear on a Sunday from the little book of the prophet Zephaniah. Most of its three, short chapters are chock full of doom and gloom: the prophet looks at the geo-politics and compromised religion of his day and begins with this "all-time feel-good" gospel: "I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth, says the Lord. I will sweep away humans and animals; I will sweep away the birds of the air and the fish

of the sea. [...] I will cut off humanity from the face of the earth." And believe it or not, it goes downhill from there!

But finally, as if God gets tired of this prophet's nagging and bitterness, something happens in chapter three that is shockingly, wonderfully delightful: God suddenly gets happy and he wants us to get happy, too. Why? Not because we are ignoring our sins or all the problems of life, but because of the assurance that God's people will not be amongst those who are swept away- there will always be some who authentically represent God- a "remnant", "left-overs" (as it were) who can be counted on to keep the faith. We are invited to be part of that and to join in the happiness that this brings not only to God's people, but even to God Himself. "The Lord, your God, is in your midst," the normally depressing Zephaniah writes almost in spite of himself, "a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love, he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival."

One of the modern translations I use in sermon preparation translates that passage this way: "He will exult with joy over you, he will renew you by his love; he will *dance with shouts of joy* for you as on a day of festival." This is a shocking,

indecent and perfectly wonderful image of God's *being happy!* Of course, it is wickedly anthropomorphic- showing God as behaving like a human being. It doesn't give us an accurate image of a transcendent, almighty Supreme Being: not really. But the point is that, as an expression of God's joy in a people redeemed and renewed, it is not an aloof, serene smile of disembodied contentment. It is overwhelming, all-consuming joy from a God who not only *wishes* us to be "Be Happy!" but even *shares* in that happiness. May we, like Paul, feel such joy at our reconciliations with God and the reordering of our lives when we come home to Him. Let us be able to say, "I'm happy- thanks be to God." And then God, for his part, can be happy too, and dance with us.