

Joy: The Joy of Jesus - 12th March 2023

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[0 : 0 0] Now, as Jane was saying, we're on this final week of this Sunday series we've been doing on joy, this sense of gladness we can have knowing that God is with us through all of the ups and downs, the peaks and troughs of life.

And whilst we've explored various aspects of joy over the last couple of months or so, I'd like to finish this series today by focusing on the joy that comes with knowing Jesus.

Now, knowing Jesus, that's a big subject. That's a big subject. So I'm going to break it down a bit, hopefully, this morning into a buffet of bite-sized chunks, because who doesn't love a buffet?

So we're going to look, though, in particular, at the idea of the body of Christ as a way of understanding, hopefully, some of the ways in which the joy of Jesus can be ours.

By my reckoning, though, there are actually three ways in which the Bible talks about the body of Christ. Three lines of thinking, which are a bit like those old tear-out bingo cards you used to get, with sort of three lines or so.

[1 : 0 5] If we put them all together, we might just get a full house this morning. So if you're up for it, eyes down and all that. Yes, says Sian. Thank you. Two little ducks and all that. Well done. Well done. So the first way, perhaps, of understanding this idea of the body of Christ is perhaps the most literal of it, which is the physical body of Christ, the physical body of Jesus himself.

You know, for all his loving words and the truth which Jesus shared through them, I suspect it was actually often Jesus' physical presence with people that gave them as much, if not more, comfort and joy than anything else about him in life.

I mean, if we think about it, it's often where Jesus decides to go and who he physically spends time with that speaks the loudest about his love.

So from the word go, we can hear a young one in the background here. Good sound effects. I like this. As a baby, though, before he even says a word, we see Jesus being born out of wedlock to a peasant couple from a backwater town called Nazareth.

We see his parents inviting shepherds, you know, proper outsiders in society, to have the privilege of being the first visitors to see Jesus in the flesh.

[2 : 2 4] We see there was a family welcoming other visitors from the east, foreigners of a different religion and language and culture into their midst. And if that's not a statement of radical inclusion from the word go, I don't quite know what is.

We then see Jesus fleeing for his life, becoming a refugee in Egypt. Again, a physical fact, which I'd suggest needs to inform our views on immigration and the way we welcome refugees and asylum seekers to our country, knowing that Jesus himself was a refugee.

But this early start of including outsiders by being physically present with them, it continues into Jesus' adulthood as well. So he's accused of dining with sinners, you know, spending time in the company of those who others would shun, but he happily sits down and breaks bread with them.

He physically allows and appreciates being anointed by a woman we call of ill repute, or of being touched by a menstruating woman. He lays hands on lepers, the lame, the demon-possessed.

He touches and heals dead people, all of whom are reckoned by others to be unclean and would therefore be sort of spiritually contagious in their eyes.

[3 : 4 1] What else does he do? Well, he physically spends time in proper conversation with women, and he gives them an equal footing to men, again, which was a real taboo in his time. He welcomes and embraces children, championing them, not as ones to ignore, but in fact to imitate in life.

He provides for people's physical needs too, whether wine at a wedding, bread for the 5,000 or a fish breakfast for his disciples. He's physically transfigured, revealing his inner glory.

What else? Well, he takes a donkey ride, not as a pleasure beach pastime perhaps, but I'm sure he quite enjoyed it, but as a physical statement of humility. He washes his friends' feet and he breaks bread with them.

And then he takes a beating and a whipping. He wears a physical crown of thorns. He carries his own cross to his own execution, and he endures the physical pain of crucifixion that we can barely imagine.

But then most importantly of all, he experiences bodily resurrection, a literal, physical rising from the dead, which overcomes the powers of darkness and destruction once and for all.

[4 : 55] And then he physically ascends into heaven, still promising in ways we'll soon see, to be with us always. He was a physical being, Jesus.

The body of Christ literally with us makes a huge difference. And that series of ways Jesus has been in our world. Well, that sounds like a creed.

It sounds like a God that I can follow. You know, a God who in Jesus gets down in our dirt to dust us down and offer us new life, eternal life in all its fullness.

See, the body of Christ, the way he comes to identify and physically be God with us, well, that reality is one way, I'd say.

We can know joy. We can know the inner gladness in our lives because Jesus has been there. He's done it. He's got the sandals. He's worn a T-shirt.

[5 : 50] And most importantly, he's found a way through it. And yet Jesus' physical presence, this literal body of Christ, if you think about him in that way, I'd say it gives us more than just a reason to be joyful in our lives because it also provides us with a model of how we might physically, practically live.

And as I said last week, being physically present with others, simply turning up, sitting alongside, cooking meals for, putting an arm around, cheering on, whatever it is, that physical company is so often all that's needed to share God's joy with others.

So for example, you know, on Friday, just gone, we were meant to have pub club down at the Crown in Chasetown. And yet with all the snow and so many schools being closed on Friday, I put a message out first thing Friday morning on Facebook to say we were cancelling it, mainly because I didn't want to be encouraging people to come out late into a freezing evening when getting there might have been okay, but getting home on the ice and so on could have been pretty tricky.

Now in hindsight, looking at the weather, it was a sunny day on Friday when all the snow was melting pretty quickly. May have been overcautious with that one. My risk assessment and all that, as the predicted rain and snow didn't quite come.

But for those who didn't get the message on Facebook and still showed up at the crowd and there were half a dozen or so, when they messaged me to say, is this the right pub, who's here kind of thing, I actually thought, good on them, good on them for being present together, for making eye contact, sharing stories, buying each other a drink and so on because turning up is often a pretty Jesus-like thing to do.

[7 : 38] And if you fancy turning up and keeping these two and others company at the next pub club, then do look out for more details because it's a simple, but I'd say a pretty profound way actually of being alongside one another.

It's a model I think which Jesus gives us. And we could say then that Jesus' physical presence here on earth, that's one way the body of Christ brings us joy.

A second but connected way of understanding the body of Christ though is the way in which Jesus is present with us as the body of Christ when we share in communion.

Indeed, at his last supper, again, a physical in-person gathering for Jesus. Jesus says these famous words as he breaks and shares bread around his disciples.

He said, this is my body given for you. Do this in remembrance of me. Now, when we share in the bread and wine of communion here, we're following Jesus' command to do this in remembrance of me.

[8 : 45] And in many churches, the words, the body of Christ or the body of Christ broken for you are said when it's distributed, when it's given out. And we do that here.

I do that here when we give the bread out. As you may know though, we're going to go a little bit of theology this morning. There are a range of different views as to what the bread and these words, the body of Christ, actually mean in the context of communion.

For example, some people believe that the bread that's given in some mysterious way actually becomes the body of Christ.

There's a change in the substance of the bread. Not in the form it appears or tastes, but its essence becomes the body of Christ.

Now, if you want some posh words this morning, the word for that belief is transubstantiation. It's a heck of a score in Scrabble, I tell you. But the bread and the wine, for those who believe this, is obviously treated with the utmost reverence.

[9 : 50] Another belief, which is similar but different, is another word, which is consubstantiation. Now, for those with this view, there's no mystical change to the substance of the bread and wine.

Rather, people believe that Jesus is present in the bread and the wine. And by that, I mean think of it like a sponge, if you like, containing water. The bread is the sponge.

Jesus is the water. So the bread in communion, people might believe. It contains Jesus in some way. So again, people who have that view would say that in communion, in the bread as the body of Christ, Jesus is present in a uniquely special way.

That's the second way. For other people though, it's not so much the bread and the wine, more it's the act of taking communion that matters. The bread and wine therefore become physical channels through which God's presence becomes more tangible, if you like.

The bread as the body of Christ is a way of meeting and communing with God. And then fourthly, another way to think about the body of Christ in communion. For others, the bread and wine are a memorial.

[11 : 05] They are simple but profound reminders. They're signs and symbols of what Jesus has done for us. The bread as the body of Christ is a metaphor to help us remember Jesus and all that he's done for us.

Four different ways. I don't know which of these perhaps resonate with you, what you would say, where your head might be at in terms of how you might understand what goes on in communion. That's a nice light topic to have over coffee, I think, for conversation, I'm sure.

I think for me, it's probably a mix of the bottom two, the third and the fourth one. That's probably where my head's at on that. For me, I'd say the act of communion somehow becomes a channel, you know, a ritual through which God's spirit moves in a special way.

But the bread and wine themselves, for me, are reminders, are kind of multi-sensory aids, if you like, to remember and celebrate Jesus. But you're perfectly entitled to have your own view on that, which is different to mine.

However, I think in all this, the beauty of Jesus saying, this is my body, as he distributes the bread at the Last Supper, is that he doesn't explain how this bread is his body, how it is the body of Christ.

[12 : 23] He just says, it is, this is my body. And therefore, he in effect, I think, leaves the disciples and now us to work out for ourselves what that means.

So that's why I'm happy to say, the body of Christ, when I distribute bread in communion to people of all views. Because in inviting people, as we do as a prayer at the end of communion, to draw near with faith, I trust God and I trust you to receive the bread in a way which is most beneficial for your own journey with Jesus.

Now for some, receiving communion is such an important part of their faith that they would want to receive it every week and for some, they want to receive it every day. Again, for me, I think how I lead us perhaps as a church, I prefer us to have communion perhaps every five or six weeks or so, really as a way to keep it, in my view, special as a service rather than risk it becoming too routine possibly.

But again, the good news is that as part of a team of churches here in Burntwood, communion is available at least twice a week locally and if people are housebound, in a care home, in a hospital or a hospice, we can always bring communion to your door, to you, your bedside or wherever if that would be helpful.

However, I think in this whole idea of the body of Christ in communion, I think for me, regardless of how we quite work it out, the most important thing is the difference that receiving communion makes to the way we then live out our lives.

[14 : 03] You see, as Jesus says, this is my body, he's not just handing out the bread, he breaks the bread at the same time and I think that's significant because that means I'd say that when we remember through the body of Christ that communion we're also remembering that Jesus was broken for us on the cross.

Indeed, when Jesus then says do this in remembrance of me, I think he's saying, yes, give out bread in remembrance of me but perhaps even more importantly, be prepared to be broken for others in remembrance of me.

Be willing perhaps to have your heart broken for the things which break mine, says Jesus. Perhaps he might say give your time, your energy, your money, your care, your love to others, put in others' needs before our own and he might say, as you remember me at communion, I will give you the practical and the spiritual sustenance you need to do that on from here but do do that, do be broken for others, do be a blessing to others because I have first loved you.

so that for me is perhaps another way to think about the body of Christ and how that can become a daily reality for us which even in our brokenness can be a beautiful, joyful thing because God is with us in that.

But then a third and final way to understand this idea of the body of Christ. I think it's a way of understanding our corporate life together under God.

[15:41] so the Apostle Paul perhaps famously for us he says this, you are the body of Christ, you are the body of Christ and each one of you is a part of it.

Now it's a familiar idea maybe to some of us, this idea that just as a body is made up of many parts, you know, eyes, hands, hair, feet, stomach, bladder and so on, so as a community under God each of us has a different but essential part to play.

So whilst, for example, we might long to enjoy the glamour which comes from being on show as a flowing head of hair for example, you know, because you're worth it or whatever.

Actually for someone else's benefit rather than perhaps just wanting to be flowing locks, for someone else's benefit we may need to see ourselves as a bladder because that is of far more practical benefit and if you want to stretch the metaphor a bit, it might be that as a bladder in the body of Christ our job is to bring relief to other people.

That kind of idea. I'm not sure that's a word from the Lord this morning but take that as you wish. See, in community as church under Jesus who's the head of the body we all have this essential unique role to play and describing us as the body of Christ.

[17:05] I think it's a useful metaphor for us to get our heads around that. However, I also think that this idea of being the body of Christ is actually much more than a picture.

It's much more than a metaphor. You see, elsewhere, the Apostle Paul underlines this body of Christ idea like this when he says this. He says, in him, Jesus, you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his spirit.

you and I are where God dwells. I mean, think about that for a moment. Our hands, our feet, our mouths, our hearts become the way that God, certainly since Jesus' physical ascension, seems now to be physically, humanly present in the world.

God. That's pretty profound, I think. It's not that we are God, but that through God's spirit, God resides, God dwells, God abides with us and in us.

And so, really, in effect, we become the body of Christ. Now, that's a truth which, to quote Spider-Man's Uncle Ben, you know, with great power comes great responsibility and yet the good news is that the idea of the body of Christ here is that it's not on our shoulders, it's a shared responsibility, a shared privilege.

[18:38] We are the body of Christ, not me or you individually. It's the collective thing. And indeed, to try and be the complete body of Christ as an individual, to think that we got this cracked without being in community with others, well, that's just pretty daft, really.

As daft, as Paul says, as the eye saying to the ear, you know, I don't need you, I can be all things. Now, truly to be the body of Christ, we need to be alongside the Spirit of God who is present in each of us.

It's a team effort. The theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer puts it like this, he says, we are members of a body, not only when we choose to be, but in our whole existence.

So, when you're not here, often for very good reasons, I get that, when you're not here though, you are missed, you are missed, missed on a personal level, because we like you, on a sort of friendly level, but also, more profoundly, I think you're missed in the way God's Spirit in me misses being alongside God's Spirit in you, and vice versa.

when we're together, something different, something special, something unique happens in that unity, that corporate body, the body of Christ, feels more complete, more whole when we're together.

[20 : 07] I'm going to quote Bonhoeffer again, this one's a bit denser in its language, but see what you make of this. He says, the prisoner, the sick person, the Christian in exile, sees in the companionship of a fellow Christian, a physical sign of the gracious presence of God.

In times of loneliness, visitor and visited, recognizing each other, the Christ who is present in the body, they receive and meet each other as one meets the Lord in reverence, humility, and there's that word, joy, enjoy.

This word joy, I think, if the joy of the Lord is indeed our strength as we were singing, then I'd say we gain God's strength from the joy of being alongside each other as the body of Christ and that strength enables us in turn to fulfill this purpose of being the body of Christ, to be Jesus to the world around us.

And as we were saying, in order to do that, to be Jesus, we can do no better than draw on the example of Jesus himself, the original mold-breaking body of Christ and follow his ways, shaping community life, being generous to those in need, championing the poor and the marginalized, including those who others may seek to keep outside.

God's need to be together. What does that look like on a practical basis? We've got some muscle, we've got some say between us, we've got some muscle to stand up against injustice, whether that's locally, say, protesting against the premature closure of the Burntwood Health and Wellbeing Centre, which is going to leave 5,000 people in our town without a GP, or maybe nationally campaigning against what I would say is the inhumane and heartless way in which our government are planning to effectively make it impossible for genuine refugees and asylum seekers to find a home here.

[22 : 15] And indeed the body of Christ is not just a Burntwood thing, the body of Christ is a worldwide body, as evidenced, I'd say, by the mutual joy which has come through welcoming and getting to know our friends who've arrived from Hong Kong.

And again, I'd say it's our responsibility as the body of Christ to welcome those here who no longer feel safe or perhaps able to protest against injustice in their own country.

That idea of welcoming those who are not safe, it may not always be a popular decision to take at the moment, but it is part of the way I'd say that we, as the body of Christ, are called to live out Jesus' radical message of joyful, loving inclusion to the wider world.

So, the body of Christ, of which there are three ways to think about it, I'd say. Whether it's Jesus' physical presence in his time here on earth, whether it's the broken bread we consume in remembrance of him at communion, or the way in which we are united by the Spirit to be Jesus to each other and the world around us.

There are always, I'd suggest, in which this idea of joy, the gladness which comes from knowing God with us, can be experienced. And I think in all this, as we work these things through, I think my prayer is that we would know the joy of Jesus through the way in which the body of Christ is part of our ongoing faith journey, both individually, but also as a church community.

[23 : 59] And indeed, with that in mind, and with it being St. Patrick's Day this coming Friday, I want to close by saying a part of a famous prayer from St. Patrick, St. Patrick's Breastplate Prayer.

So, it includes these words. He says, Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ on my right, Christ on my left, Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down, Christ when I arise, Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me, Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me, Christ in every eye that sees me, Christ in every ear that hears me.

And may that perhaps be our prayer as we joyfully live out our faith in response to and as members of the body of Christ.

Amen. Amen. Amen.