

May I speak in the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I was in Balboa Park last Sunday afternoon. It was a lovely time; good to see all the people promenading up and down the avenues there. And I was intrigued by a series of booths that had various people trying to persuade you to follow their particular course of life. All different traditions were there.

And I was particularly intrigued to see a booth staffed by the Fundamentalist Atheists. And they were giving out leaflets trying to get people to share their belief that there was no God. And I couldn't help noticing their strap line around their tent, and it read, "Be an atheist - enjoy life."

What a terrible condemnation of us and all people of faith, that the atheists should think that their main selling point is that you need to be an atheist to enjoy life. What a terrible choice: be a person of faith and not enjoy life, or be an atheist and enjoy life? We're going to be baptizing two boys later on in this service, Paul and Elliot, and we're not setting them on a path to misery. We're setting them on a path that leads to unending joy; a joy that can't be found anywhere else.

So I want to talk this morning about joy, an essential part of our Christian faith. Joy is one of the fruits of the Spirit. Do you remember that list? Love, joy, patience, peace, preach kindness, and self-control. It's also the topic of a book.

If you look inside the service sheets, you'll see that Rebecca is organizing an all-parish summer reading group. And one of the books that's on that list is the "Book of Joy" written by the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu. I only found this out this morning. I wish I'd known; it might have helped in my sermon preparation for this week. But anyway, we could look at that and carry on thinking about this important theme of joy.

Our Psalm encourages us to be joyful. It starts, "Be joyful in the Lord." And I think our readings today can introduce us to two aspects of joy. Let me start with the Old Testament reading, and I want to say

something about Sarah, Abraham's wife, someone who is known for her joy and laughter.

She says, "God has brought laughter for me. Everyone who hears will laugh with me." Sarah is remembered for her laughing, and what a joyful, a wonderful legacy that is. What a great thing to be remembered for. In fact, laughter plays a central part in this whole Abraham and Sarah story. It's actually Abraham who laughs first.

In the previous chapter, we read that God appears to Abraham first and says to him, "Sarah, your wife, will have a son. And she will be the mother of many nations." Something which we're told made Abraham fall face down and laugh.

In the next chapter we read that these three mysterious visitors come with a similar message. Now clearly, the marital communication in Abraham and Sarah's house is about on a level of me and my wife, because Abraham forgot to tell Sarah that she was going to have a baby. It's just one of those small details which, in the course of domestic life, just can get overlooked.

So when these three visitors come, Sarah's hearing the news for the first time. And her reaction was similar to Abraham's. She laughs to herself saying, "After I have grown old, shall I have this pleasure?" And sure enough, the promised son came and they called him Isaac, a Hebrew name which means "laughter." So we can appreciate the play on words here. When Sarah says "God has brought laughter for me," she's saying "God has brought Isaac for me."

So why did these two old crocks laugh? They laughed because only a fool would believe that a woman who had one foot in the grave would have the other foot in the maternity ward. They laughed because God expected them to believe it anyway. They laughed because God seemed to believe it. They laughed because they half believed it themselves. They laughed because laughing felt better than crying. And they laughed because maybe by some crazy chance it was true, and they really did have something to laugh about.

But how could it be true, two old, infertile people having a child? It could be true, as Sarah is reminded, because nothing is too wonderful for the Lord. Nothing is impossible with God, and that is definitely something to laugh about.

The writer Goethe said, "Men show their character in nothing more clearly than by what they think laughable." Abraham, Sarah, and all people of faith laugh because they know that nothing is impossible with God. And Sarah's snigger of surprise was transformed into a good old belly laugh when, nine months later, what had been told to her became true.

I think that finding faith is a bit like getting a joke. You know, when you hear a joke, some people get it and other people don't. It just passes them by, and it doesn't get any better if you keep telling the joke. You can't explain it; it's just how it is.

We can't prove the reality of God. We can't argue people to faith. But if we tell our story, share our experience, some people will get it and other people won't. Some people, like the atheists in Balboa Park, just don't find the deep joy that comes with knowing the God for whom nothing is impossible.

So I'll turn now to our Gospel reading. It's all about the sending out of the disciples. It's a story that comes in all the Gospels. The Lord of the harvest sends out the laborers into his harvest, and Jesus sends the disciples out with the following instructions: "Proclaim the good news, cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons."

I can just imagine the more sarcastic of the disciples saying, "Oh yeah, what should we do after lunch?" I mean, that's a big ask. They would no doubt have felt a bit intimidated to be given this charge. Up to now, they'd been having a lovely time just going around with Jesus, watching Him do all these things, in the company of their fellow disciples and friends, and then all of a sudden they get this big challenge. "Now it's your turn; you're being sent out to do this work."

But the story tells us ... in the story in Luke, when he tells the story, he says that "When they came back, they returned filled with joy." I'm sure they didn't leave with joy. When Jesus gave them these instructions, they'd have felt many mixed emotions: fear, anxiety, concern, nervous, leaving the comfort of all that they'd been familiar with. I'm sure they'd be surprised to hear that they would return with joy, but they did. That was the overwhelming feeling they had when they returned. When they'd been out, fulfilled Jesus' charge, shown the compassion on people that He'd shown, that for them turned to be a great source of joy.

And this is not an uncommon phenomenon. I read a book; in fact I've read many books on this theme, "How to be Happy." And in this book I read the following quote: "Joy can be real only if people look upon their life as a service, and have a definite object in life outside themselves and their personal happiness."

Happiness. It's not just this book. You read any book of happiness. I'm sure in this "Book of Joy" that I'm going to look at over the summer, there'll be that theme that joy and happiness comes as a by-product of serving others.

And there's an irony in that. If you pursue your own happiness as an end in itself, you won't find it. But if you serve others and don't think about your own happiness, then you'll find joy and happiness. I think that's what Jesus meant when He said, "Whoever wants to save their life will lose it. But whoever loses their life for Me will find it." As I was saying, joy comes as a by-product of serving others and putting them first. J.M. Barrie put it more poetically, "Those who bring sunshine into the lives of others cannot keep it from themselves."

You may remember a couple of months ago, we had some congregational meetings after our two services. And one of the themes, in fact the predominant theme I'd say, that came out of those two meetings was a desire to look outwards; to serve others. And I think that's partly because we're in a good and healthy place now and it's right that we look beyond the needs of our own

community. And that call is not just a sign of health; it's also a route to joy.

And the vestry have picked up what came out of the congregational meetings, so we're going to have our own "sending out" on Rally Sunday in September. And the vestry is busy identifying half a dozen projects that we've been involved with that we can develop as we get more involved in the wider community, as we do more outreach and look outside of ourselves. And we'll be presenting some very clear opportunities for us to get involved in, to look outside, to serve others. And my hope is that we, like the disciples, will find that service to be a source of great joy.

So as we turn now to the baptism of two cousins, Paul and Elliot, the Benton boys, which I do think sounds ... If they ever form a country band, I hope they do call them The Benton Boys. Let's pray that they will find the way of faith to be a way of deep joy. That unlike our friends in Balboa Park, they'll find joy in the worship of God for whom nothing is impossible, and they'll find joy in the service of others.

Amen.