

## Sermons at the Anglican Church of Luxembourg

### Harvest Sunday 2018

#### Psalm 126 – Joy!

Charlie Mackesey's distinctive artwork hangs on the walls of the famous, including Whoopi Goldberg and Sting

Asked in a recent interview 'when he became aware of his artistic ability, this is what he said:

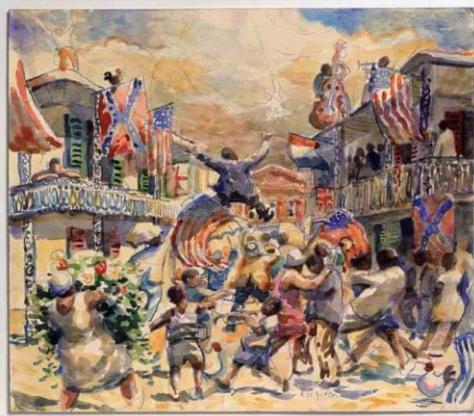
An atheist, he was sitting in a London park with that “there must be more to life than meets the eye” feeling

He describes how “Jesus quietly introduced me to a journey into finding people really beautiful, which is how my art really began. Because I felt inside me he was going, ‘Look. How beautiful is that guy sitting on that bench’ and I would never have noticed him before...”

The journey came to a crunch point at a musical festival listening to the gospel song O happy Day in, he says, a portalo, which pierced through his atheism and bought him to tears

That journey took him initially to live in New Orleans and now in London. And the awareness of beauty, joy and those cities have combined in these two paintings

I hope you can see them – if not feel free to google them now, but don't then check your emails



Joy: New Orleans, on my desk at home

Sheer exuberance

See the angel up in the sky

See the woman, lower left. She can hardly carry the massive load of what looks like flowers and fruit and goodness

Joy: The Albert Hall

The same characters appear in London. And note again the way people are struggling to grasp and carry the sheer abundance

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/entertainment/2016/april/unorthodox-evangelist-artist-reaches-unlikely-audience>

And its this theme of joy that I us to turn to today, this Harvest Sunday, with the help of this joyful Psalm 126

Like wisdom that we looked at last week, joy in the Bible is the result of combining two ingredients: faith and realism

Joy is different from the feeling of happiness, amusement or laughter

For sure, it may include those things. But its something much deeper, richer and profound

Joy is not about circumstances. It's not dependent on our good luck in escaping hardship or a feeling we can conjure up by numbing our nerve endings with some sort of self-medication, getting rid of risk or avoiding disappointment by depersonalising relationships

No, joy is something much deeper, richer and profound

Look at the psalm with me

Just like last week's psalm, Ps 126 pivots around one verse: v3

Read v3

What comes before it is in the past tense. What follows is in the future

This Psalm is part of the Jewish liturgy, a Song of Ascents, used by pilgrims on their journey to the Temple at Jerusalem

Looking back to their nation's history, their personal history, there was a moment when all that was broken was mended, all that was impossible became possible, the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion (v1)

Some think it was deliverance from slavery in Egypt

Others think it was the memory of the people being bought back from Exile in Babylon

Whatever it was, other nations saw it and were amazed: READ v2b

And for those it happened to it was initially like a dream: as if their mouths were full of laughter and joy (v2a) and they too said: READ v3

There it is: faith and reality combine to issue in Joy

But that was. And now this is.

Years later, a new generation faces a reality that reminds them of the suffering, the bewilderment, the fear of their predecessors

So they too cry out, holding together faith and reality: READ v4a

In the prayer of the psalmist there are two beautiful images, so suitable for our season of Creationtide and especially Harvest

The first is from the dry Negev desert, at the southern end of the Sinai Peninsula – so dry at times it seems nothing can live or survive. It's criss-crossed by shallow ravines scoured by the dry, hot, dusty wind. That is the reality.

But suddenly rain can come, filling the ravines and turning them into watercourses. Overnight, that moisture causes seeds to sprout, carpeting the once dry ground with bright flowers and grass

This is an image of the sudden arrival of joy as faith and circumstances combine

The other is an image of slow effort, where joy is the slowly emerging, long-held fruit of living faith and reality

So those who do the hard work of sowing, the painful compassionate work of weeping at the reality do so nevertheless trusting that one day God will act and they will shift from sowing and weeping to reaping and what feels like a home coming

The tears of joy will give way to shouts of joy

What do I mean by that?

Joy is rooted in our mindset: whether it is one of scarcity or abundance

A scarcity mind-set hoards, sees every encounter as win-lose, a zero-sum game, where my greatness is at your expense.

An abundance mindset isn't just about positive thinking, optimism, can-do attitudes

From the perspective of faith, what I'm talking about is what happens when we as creatures recognise the reality of our limitations

But not finding that to be a source of anxiety or fear

But one of trust in our Creator

This psalm may have been used at a Jewish Harvest festival to which people brought a sacrifice of first fruits from their field

Offering first fruits wasn't just a gesture of sacrifice of the best

It was a gesture of joyful trust. That in giving my first fruits, I trust the Creator that there will second fruits, third fruits, more fruits with which I can feed my family, have seeds to plant for next year's crop

Its not about my abundance. It's about His.

And that's where joy comes from. Not from circumstances. But from the holding together of the reality of our lives with faith in the God of abundance, who promises to give us not always what we want but always what we need.

And this is what Jesus woke Charlie Mackesey up to on a park bench in London 25 years ago

It's what he expresses in the roundedness of the figures in his art, the sheer abundance of the sheaves they carry and the joy that marks their encounters with each other.

Every so often I see joy break out here. The first time was at the baptism of Felix and Maina's daughter Naomi as we sung *Come all you people, come and praise your maker*

But then it kind of retreats

I have seen joy in the tears sometimes shed when I have visited people and asked "How can I pray for you..." and we have talked about holding together faith and reality in the face of pain and, in some cases, loss

Jesus once said to his disciples just before his crucifixion: You will have pain now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no-one will take your joy from you." (Jn 16:22)