

## Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> September – Nehemiah 8:1,8-12 ‘Homemade JOY’

Last weekend our son Isaac underwent emergency lifesaving surgery. He took a heavy knock whilst playing sport and unbeknownst to anyone at the time, or for a few hours afterwards, sustained a serious internal injury. Some of you know about this and for many of you this is unexpected news. On behalf of Isaac, Alise and Amelie and myself, I would like to thank all of you for your prayers, love and support. It has meant the world to us.

But why I am talking about this now? I'd planned a couple of weeks ago to think about 'Joy' today as our theme, but why haven't I changed it in the light of what's happened? Surely of all weeks, that is inappropriate? Our son nearly died! How can I talk about joy?

It's an extreme example, but there may be difficult things you're facing as well. Maybe you're dreading the change of regulations tomorrow which means you can't now see the friends or family members you'd just got used to seeing again. Maybe you've had a bad week generally, maybe there's other bad news you're trying to deal with. Maybe you just find the news so depressing.

Where is joy? How is joy possible?

**The problem is that we often confuse joy with happiness.** When we talk about 'joy', what we mean is happiness. Happiness is a temporary state based on our external circumstances. If things are good, we're happy; if they're not we're miserable.

Joy is different. Joy is potentially a permanent state not based on our circumstances. It is both a discipline and a gift. The reason I stuck with my choice of topic is precisely because I'm not talking about happiness – and let's face it, this week has been traumatic – but joy.

And actually **the point of joy is that it's not only about the good times in life.** If joy means anything at all, it has to be possible when life is tough, when bad things happen. If it's just a fair-weather friend then it's not much use at all is it?

So today we're going to think about real joy – biblical joy. How can we grow into joyful people whatever life throws at us? Here's the key:

**First, joy is about what God has already done.** IN our passage today, the people were weeping when God's word was read to them. No doubt they were convicted of the ways they'd let God down. But Nehemiah wouldn't let them stay in their grief – there was another side too. They were back in their home city as a great act of God. When Nehemiah gives this great statement: 'The joy of the Lord is your strength', he saying: 'Remember all that God has done.'

We too can do the same. We have God's great acts in history, especially all that Jesus did for us. The cross is real! The tomb is empty! These are the things that bring us joy, and therefore strength. We also have God's acts in *our* hearts, the particular ways he's been at work in our lives. These are real, and no-one can take them away from us. They are our foundation when the storm whips up and the seas get choppy.

**Second, joy is about what God has promised to do.** In the passage, the people were reminded that God's restoration had brought them a new future. For us, we have the even greater promise of eternal life. Whatever the present, our future is secure, because God has promised that it will be. As we understand more of God's promises, like Nehemiah's listeners we can be filled with great joy.

**Third, and finally, joy is about what we choose to focus on.** My son nearly died, but my son also lived. The accident was horrible, but the NHS were brilliant. The stress was sickening, but our friends and family have been amazing. You can see where I'm heading. In every situation, we can focus on the bad stuff or the good. It's not that the bad stuff isn't there – but it's not the whole story, it doesn't have to win. The key to joy is thankfulness.

And that is a discipline. It's not about pretending. Or wearing a mask. There are lots of times I don't feel thankful. But on those days I can *choose* to be thankful. And the more I choose it, the more I am.

Homemade joy is ultimately about practising thankfulness where you are. Thankfulness for God's eternal promises. Thankfulness for even the little blessings you enjoy. Here's a tip that someone gave me 20 years ago that made a huge difference to my life. **Keep a praise diary.** Write down every day something you're thankful for. When I received this suggestion, at the time I was very low. Life was a struggle. But within days I couldn't believe how quickly I started to find lots of things to be thankful for. It wasn't a magic wand – but it was a discipline and a gift.

So here it is. Happiness is overrated. Joy is priceless. My son lived – but although I'm wrung out, and still thinking most of the time about my beautiful boy, I have something else. Something deeper than happiness. Joy. And that joy is my strength.