

The Joy of the Children of God

Galatians 3.23-25, 4.4-7

Rev Dr Jos M. Strengtholt

2020 is near. How shall we live, in 2020? I hope and pray that the year will be full of joy for you.

Some people have the impression that joy is an impossibility for Christians, and maybe you find that hard as well.

Our Reformed brothers use a beautiful confession, the Westminster Confession.

It starts with this question: What is the chief end of man?

And the answer: Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever.

Enjoy God?

For many people, joy is not the first thing when God comes to mind. But what can be more joyful than to have God as Father - our good, loving, wonderful, caring Father.

We will consider this thought with Paul's letter to the Galatians as our guide. He wrote this letter in the late 40's, early 50s, so about 50 years after Jesus had been born, and 20 years after Jesus died and rose again.

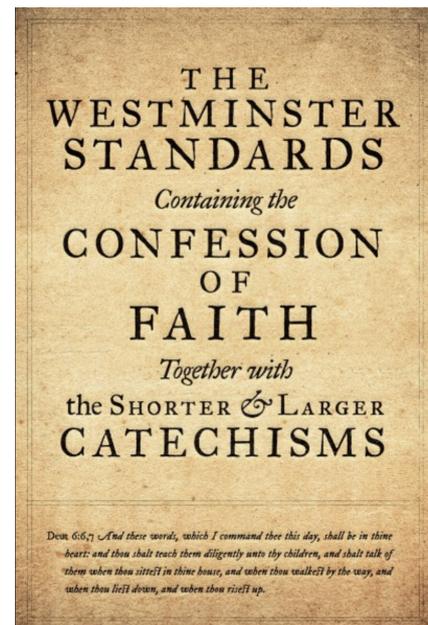
When you are young, you think something that happened 20 or 50 years ago is long. But that friends, is a mistake. The Beatles is not long ago. The landing on the moon is not long ago. The killing of John F Kennedy is not long ago. The Gulf War is not long ago.

Mature people remember those events. And for the early church, when Paul wrote this letter, events of the birth and death and resurrection of Jesus were fresh. It was part of their memory, part of their life.

1. God sent his Son

So when Paul said, 'God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law', he was not talking theology, philosophy, or distant vague history. But he simply reminds his readers of recent events. The facts that occurred during their own lifetime.

But Paul writes it, because the facts are important, and how he expresses them is important.



God sent his Son...

Take those words at face value. Paul says that baby Jesus was the Son of God before he was born, because God sent him to be born. He existed with God before he became a human baby.

Just a few words of Paul, and we are right in the middle of deep theology.

In the stories of the Hebrew Scriptures, what we call the Old Testament, we are used to God sending. He sends angels and prophets. But never his Son.

In our Creed we say, 'For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and was made man.'

That is where our joy should start. God sent his Son for us. For you. For saving you. Not for condemning you.

When Jesus was baptised, a voice was heard from heaven, saying: 'This is my Son, the beloved'. So God from heaven uses the word. 'He is my Son.'

This family-language we use, of Father and Son, is language that expresses intimacy and it is language that expresses the heart of our Christian faith in God.

God is from eternity a communal being - There has never been a moment when He was not thinking and dialoguing within himself.

And when God thinks, or speaks, those words and thought are divine. Eternal. Powerful. They are just as much God as God is God. That is why in our Creed we say of the Son of God, that He is God from God - true God from true God.

Did God ever not think, or speak? Humanly speaking, that is impossible for the eternal being. Because someone who does not think or speak is brain-dead, mute.

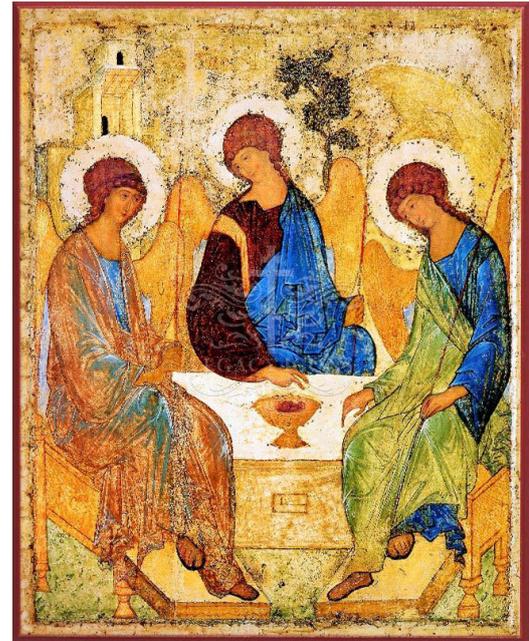
Some theologians have argued that the language we use, of God the Father and God the Son, suggests that the Father preceded the Son in time.

They argue, a Son comes after a Father, so the Son is lower than the Father. He is not as divine as the Father is divine. But then you miss the point. The language of Father and Son wants to underline intimacy and equality.

And by the way, is your father more human than you are? No of course.

And God the Father is not more divine than God the Son.

That is why in our Creed we say that the Son of God is of one Being with the Father.



This is complicated, is it not? But important. When Jesus was born, it was God coming into our world. God himself.

God sent his Son, but as they are of the same being, we really believe that it was God who himself came to us. So the sending was not a command. It was the result of a common decision.

God lowered himself. God stooped down. The universe held its breath. Christmas was the most unbelievable event in the history of the cosmos. God made himself part of the world that he had created, in order to redeem creation.

He was born of a girl in Bethlehem because he wanted to lift you up to God. This is such a reason for joy!

2. Adopted as children

But... let us not go too fast.

Actually, Paul focuses in the passage that we read, not on God's plan to save you - though that is true and important.

He writes that the Son of God was born under the law. Subject to the laws of Israel.

The focus of these words of Paul, is on Jesus who came to redeem Israel. They were the people under the law. The rest of the world did not have those laws of Israel.



You and I, if we have no Jewish background, we were never under the laws of the Old Testament. There is much good in those laws - God gave them - but God never gave those laws to you and me. They were mostly for Israel.

And for Israel, the coming of Jesus changed the meaning of the law. In the Old Testament, the laws were the mediator between God and his people. They organised man's relationship with God.

Paul wrote the letter to the Galatians to warn Jewish believers in Jesus to no longer think that keeping the laws of the Old Testament could bring them closer to God.

And what many of those Jewish followers of Jesus did was even worse - they tried to tell the non-Jewish followers of Jesus, people like you and I, that we, gentile believers, had to also obey the laws of the Old Testament - laws never intended for the world.

They specifically wanted the gentile Christians to be circumcised and to follow the Jewish food laws.

The apostles, and the early church, rejected this idea. Even the Jews were not saved because they obeyed their laws, but because God sent his Son. That is of a much

more magnificent magnitude that our efforts to be good boys and girls.

But strangely, what is it that makes us, people who never had those laws of God, often live as we can only be redeemed, and saved, and loved by God if we abide by so many rules. Do this, don't do that.

We put ourselves voluntarily under a yoke that Israel could not bear, that we cannot bear and that does not help us one step forward, but rather, miles backward.

Many non-Jewish followers of Jesus, even in our days, strangely, place themselves all the time under Israel's laws, or parts of it, or under other self-made rules. As if we can please God with that.

I am sure many of you suffer under this load of self-imposed laws. As if sticking to those things brings you closer to God.

Well, it does not, and it pushes you down in your own dirt. You will never be good enough. Many Christians lack joy because they always think they are not good enough for God.

The Son of God did not descend from the blessed life in the Trinity to make you into better followers of laws. He came to make you a follower of Him - the Son of God - and to make you a child of God. That is a totally different ball-game altogether!

That is a completely different sort of relationship. Not the relationship of a fearful servant, but that of a beloved child with his or her Father.

Jesus came to make you into what he was before he came to earth: He was God's Son, playing in the Father's lap.

And you, you have been adopted as a child of the Father. What is this stuff about laws! We are his children!

3. 'Abba! Father!'



And you know this, because you even speak to God as your Father. You even address him as 'Our Father who art in heaven'.

If you have the guts to think that God is so close to you, that He is your Father and you are his child, then do not for a moment think that our self-imposed laws and rules, can bring us any closer to God.

Love God, love the other children of God, even love your enemies. That is what the Christian life is about. And as we stumble all the time, we confess our sins and God, our loving Father, forgives. All the time.

The fact that you dare to call God your Father, is really the work of his Spirit in you. As you are a child of God, His Spirit is working in your life, in your mind, in your heart, to drive you to God, to enjoy his Fatherhood.

So we are related intimately to God in his fullness: God is our Father; his Son came to save us; his Spirit lives and works in us. Amazing. What a cause for joy!

So do not behave as if you are just a servant of God, do not for a moment think that with some rules, laws, habits, you earn favour with the boss. Useless.

If your children behave like that, it upsets you a lot. If your children act to you in order to please you because otherwise you will whack them, you will be devastated.

You love your child; you care for your child; you love them always. They do not have to earn your love by doing jobs in the house, by washing the car, by washing dishes, by mowing the lawn. You already love them.

And you still love them when they behave badly. You will not disinherit them for doing things you do not like.

They are your children, and sometimes you like to tell them to get lost, but even as lame parents, we do not mean that.

We do not want our kids to get lost, and our heavenly Father who is a more perfect Father than I will ever be, He only loves. And saves. He only and always does good to his children. Your inheritance waits for you.

Conclusion

So rejoice in being his child. Rejoice in what Jesus did for you, by coming down, by living among us. Enter the new year with that joy. "I am his child!"

What humanity has been given in Jesus Christ is not a better instructor, not a better lawgiver, but He is our redeemer who has made you children of God.

You are his child, and you will inherit the world that is coming.

God became man, so that man can rejoice in God.

Jesus came down, to lift us up.

So love God, love all children of God, and rejoice because we enter into another year to enjoy that God is your Father, your loving Father.

+Amen