

It's often funny to see how things get translated literally from one language to another, and completely lose their sense. Mike Shoup of the Knight-Ridder News Service compiled some he observed in his travels. Here are a few examples:

In a Leipzig, Germany, elevator (called a lift in Europe.) "The lift is being fixed for the next day. During that time we regret that you will be unbearable."

In a Swiss mountain inn: "Special today – no ice cream."

In the office of a Roman doctor: "Specialist in women and other diseases."

In a Paris hotel room: "Please leave your values at the front desk."

A Hong Kong dentist announced that teeth in his office were "extracted by the latest Methodists."

I'd like to have a serious conversation about joy! St. John of the Cross said that "the soul of one who loves God always swims in joy, always keeps holiday, and is always in the mood for singing." Words that are reminiscent of St. Paul's prescription in today's second reading: "Rejoice in the Lord always! I say it again! Rejoice! This is GAUDETE, or rejoicing Sunday in our Catholic tradition. But how does this fit into the overall scheme of things? And isn't this all wiped out – or just doesn't even apply -- when you go through something really tough like a pandemic or the death of someone you love? I'll try to tease this out a bit. You can take a wild guess in how many points.

First, the most joy-filled letter in the New Testament is Paul's letter to the Philippians. Yet that letter was written under circumstances that we would hardly count as joyful. Paul was in prison, uncertain of his future and cut off from his mission and community. He heard that some other preachers were preaching the gospel out of false motives. Nevertheless the letter begins with Paul's description of his own joy: "What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true, and in that I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance." (Phil 1:18-19). The letter ends with Paul's exhortation to rejoice we just heard in the words of today's second reading. (David L. Bartlett, THE LIVING PULPIT, Oct-Dec 96, Vol. 5 #4, p. 14)

But then there's that word, 'joy.' It is rarely used in our conversation or in everyday writing. Joy seems to be a word reserved for the front flap of Christmas cards, a word scripted out in elegant calligraphy beneath a snow white dove which belongs nostalgically to a long ago season or a hoped-for future that wells up in the murky psychic environment that lives within each of us. ("Two Faces of Joy," Wendy M. Wright, WEAVINGS, Nov/Dec 93, p. 13)

Second, some Catholic teaching about joy. The Church focuses our liturgy around 2 great Christian seasons, connecting them deeply with one word – joy. Advent-Christmas and Lent-Easter. Advent preface II says: "It is by his gift that already we REJOICE at the mystery of his Nativity, so that he may find us watchful in prayer and EXULTANT in his praise," and our first Lenten preface says "For by your gracious gift each year your faithful await the sacred paschal feasts with the JOY of minds made pure..." Our hymns reflect the sentiment: "JOY to the world, the Lord is come," and "That Easter Day with JOY was Bright."

It is ironic that this word, rarely heard in contemporary life, runs the length and width of the Gospel, which we call GOOD NEWS. Even before the birth of Jesus, John the Baptist, still in the womb, "leaped for joy"

at the approach of the pregnant Mary (Lk 1:44). The disciples returned to Jesus from their first mission “with joy” (Lk 10:17). In fact, it is joy that links heaven and earth, for both are joyous over the repentance of each sinner (Lk 15:7, 10), as Luke’s gospel will tell us later this year in the story of the prodigal son. Even when the disciples were left alone at the Ascension, “they returned to Jerusalem with great joy.” (Lk 24:52)

So it is not surprising that St. Paul makes JOY the rationale for his ministry (2 Cor 1:24) – that “the God of hope might fill you with all joy” (Rom 15:13), making you radiant with joy in the Spirit (Rom 14:17), and he lists joy as the SECOND of the 9 gifts of the Spirit, right after love. (Gal 5) I find it also amazing that our Catholic canonization process requires that a person be known for their joy in order to be recognized as an official saint in the Catholic church. There is no place for dour-faced believers! If we are grumpy, then we are not good Christians!

Why is this word, so frequent in scripture, so absent in our modern vocabulary? Probably because joy is not the same with other words that so occupy our American ethos. Words like pleasure, satisfaction, fun, or even happiness, which our constitution says we have a right to pursue. We see how complicated joy is when we see other scriptural uses: At Jesus’ birth, the shepherds were “filled with fear” when they heard the “great joy” (Lk 2:10). At Jesus’ death, Mary Magdalene departed quickly from the tomb with “fear and great joy” (Mt 28:8). In confronting the resurrection, the disciples “disbelieved for joy.” (Lk 24:41) The early Christians experienced their mission similarly. When Paul and Barnabas were persecuted and expelled, they shook the dust from their feet while being “filled with joy” (Acts 13:50-52). Thus the writer of James insisted that every Christian should “count it all joy when you meet various trials” (James 1:2). Paul agreed: “I find joy in my sufferings.” (Col 1:24) (Taken from WEAVINGS, Nov/Dec 93, “Joy and Religious Motivation,” by W. Paul Jones, p. 39)

That’s a little theological background, so then what about us? This is point three, for those of you who are counting! How do we become people of joy? Or, as St. John of the Cross said, how do we swim in joy, always keep holiday, and be always in the mood for singing? We have often seen faith and religion as serious business. But the scriptures actually speak of God in terms of play. In fact, the word for the relationship of the Trinity is perichoresis, which can actually mean DANCE! As serious a theologian as Thomas Aquinas says that being in touch with God can involve a kind of play like human games. He roots the spirit of play in a dazzling scriptural image of God’s own creative wisdom at play in creation, from the book of Proverbs: “I was by God’s side, a master craftsman, delighting him day after day, ever at play before God’s face, at play everywhere in God’s world, sporting with the children of earth.” (Proverbs 8:30-31) And I actually have Catholics tell me from time to time that I should not tell jokes in a homily and that we should not be laughing in church. Says who? Are the liturgical police going to remove me from the pulpit? Ever watch Pope Francis at an audience? Or Pope John XXIII?

I would suggest that a certain detachment is required for this sense of joy. A recognition of God’s hand in everything – at all times. It is also important to note that laughter does not exclude weeping. Christian joy is not an escape from sorrow. Pain and hardship still come, but they are unable to drive out the happiness of the redeemed.

A common but futile strategy for achieving joy is trying to eliminate things that hurt: get rid of pain by numbing the nerve ends, get rid of insecurity by putting more money in the bank, get rid of disappointments by depersonalizing and backing away from any serious relationships. And then try to lighten the boredom of such a life by buying joy in the form of vacations, entertainment and more and more things. But it just doesn’t work that way. Joy comes about because we recognize that God is always in charge, bringing about His kingdom and His plan, despite how it may look to us. Joy is present when we know that the promises of Christ

are sure and true. And it is also helpful to STOP long enough, to be aware of all of this. Prayer is a necessary part of being a person of joy. It reminds us who is in charge of the world – and for those of us who tend to forget – it ain't us! Joy is pure gift of God, whose grace permeates every nano-second of our existence. Some examples: the unspeakable joy sometimes of just being alive. The miracle sometimes of being just who we are with the blue sky and green grass, the faces of friends and the waves of the ocean, being just what they are. The joy of release, of being suddenly well when before we were sick, of being forgiven when before we were ashamed and afraid, of finding ourselves loved when we were lost and alone. The joy of love, which is the joy of the flesh as well as the spirit. But each of us can supply our own moments, so just 2 more things. One is that joy is always all-encompassing; there is nothings of us left over to hate with or to be afraid with, to feel guilty with or to be selfish about. Joy is where the whole being is pointed in one direction, and it is something that by its nature we never hoard but always want to share. The second thing is that joy is a mystery because it can happen anywhere, anytime, even under the most unpromising circumstances, even in the midst of suffering, with tears in its eyes – Away in a manger with no crib for a bed, even nailed to a tree. What Jesus came to tell us is that we are made for joy and that anyone who is truly joyous has a right to say that we are doing God's will on this earth. Where we have known joy, we have known Jesus. (Adapted from Buechner, LISTENING TO YOUR LIFE, p. 286-287)

One more story that I hope will add to your Advent joy. An Englishman was sent to the USA by his company to investigate the possibility of locating a new plant. He chose the Columbus, Mississippi area for a number of reasons. He also decided that while he was in the USA, he might just as well purchase a home and then return to England to get his family.

Upon his arrival in England his wife asked him pertinent questions about the home he had purchased. Among the questions was the description of the WC (water closet) commonly known in America as the bathroom. He remarked that he did not remember exactly what it looked like and suggested she write the contractor and inquire about the WC.

The contractor could not figure out exactly what the woman meant by WC and pondered the question for some time. Then he remembered that there was a Wesleyan Church in the area and it occurred to him that this must be the WC the lady was writing about. So he answered her letter by writing:

Dear Madam,

I take great pleasure in informing you that the WC is situated only 9 miles from your house in the center of a beautiful grove of southern pines and surrounded by lovely landscaping.

It will hold 22 people and is open on Thursdays and Sundays. As there are a great number of people expected during the winter months, I suggest that you come early, although there is usually plenty of standing room. This is an unfortunate situation, particularly if you are in the habit of going regularly. You no doubt will be glad to learn that a great number of people bring their lunches and make a day of it, while others who can afford it go by car and arrive just in time. I would advise you to go on Thursdays when there is an accompanist. It may interest you to know that my daughter was married there, and it was there that she met her husband. You can imagine my feelings of pride as I watched them seated there, holding hands with a look of complete contentment in their eyes. It was wonderful to see the expression on their faces.

The newest attraction is a bell, donated by a wealthy resident of the county. It rings every time a person enters, a constant reminder that some poor soul is seeking relief. A bazaar is to be held shortly to provide additional seats which have long been needed. My wife is rather delicate, so she cannot attend

regularly. It has been almost a year since she last went. Naturally it pains her greatly to be not able to go more often. I shall be delighted to reserve the best seats for you if you wish, one where you can be seen by all.

Hoping to have been of service to you....

Your contractor.

GAUDETE IN DOMINUM! REJOICE IN THE LORD ALWAYS!

FOR PERSONAL USE ONLY