While it may look like things are out of control, behind the scenes there is a God who hasn't surrendered his authority. – A.W. Tozer

October 20th The Shofar Gospel Joy

Joy must be at the heart of Christian living

The joy of the gospel should fill the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. That word "joy" is mentioned more than five hundred times in the New Testament, such is its place in the lives of Christians. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ joy is constantly born anew.

What a contrast that message is to the dominant way of living we find in today's world. That world is permeated by consumerism, by the desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet avaricious heart, in the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures, and a dulled conscience. That is not a seedbed from which Kingdom Joy can emerge. The causes of those dead ends in which too many find themselves trapped are clear to those who build their lives on the Good News of Jesus Christ.

> Whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor. God's voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fades.

We should not fall into the trap by seeing this as a problem in the world "out there". This is a very real danger for believers too. Many fall prey to it, and end up resentful, angry and listless. That is no way to live a dignified and fulfilled life; it is not God's will for us, nor is it the life in the Spirit which has its source in the heart of the risen Christ.

Urgently rebuilding our lives in Christ

The way out of this is opened up for us when we take up the invitation to rebuild our lives, the entirety of our lives in this world, rebuild them in the heart of Christ. And no one should think that this invitation is not meant for him or her, since no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord. And here is a Truth that two thousand years of Gospel living makes clear to us: the Lord does not disappoint those who take this hope-oriented step in the transformation of their lives. The Bible reassures us that whenever we take a step towards Jesus, we come to realize that he is already there, waiting for us with open arms!

Keeping in mind the exhortations of the prophets, we are called upon to be accepting of the urgency of the preaching and teaching of Jesus. ***Now*** is the time to say to Jesus: *Lord, I have let myself be deceived; in a thousand ways I have shunned your love, yet here I am once more, to renew my covenant with you. I need you. Save me once again, Lord, take me once more into your redeeming embrace.* This is one thing those apostles of today's Gospel could not do until after Pentecost – understand their need for a rejuvenated faith, for the healing balm of divine grace. They thought they had it all worked out.

Coming home always feels great

The saints remind us of how good it feels to come back to God whenever we are lost! We can come back to him time and time again because we know God never tires of forgiving us. We are more likely to be the ones who tire of seeking his mercy because we have convinced ourselves that we do not need it, that all is well in our lives of discipleship. In God there is healing, and in healing there is a revitalization of life. Christ, who told us to forgive one another "seventy times seven" (**Mt 18:22**) has given us his example: he has forgiven us seventy times seven. Time and time again he bears us on his shoulders but he cannot do that if we feel we can walk alone.

In God alone can we find enduring hope

On one level we probably know this, at least theoretically, but it is important to reiterate it as a starting point for any renewal of life, either as individual believers and as faith communities. We are strengthened knowing how no one can strip us of the dignity bestowed upon us by this boundless and unfailing divine love. With a tenderness which never disappoints, but is always capable of restoring our joy, he makes it possible for us to lift our heads and to start anew. Let us not flee from the resurrection of Jesus, let us never give up, come what may in our lives. There should be nothing in this world, nothing in story of human achievements that should inspire

us more than the life, person, mission and ministry of Jesus, a life which impels us onwards!

Joy not happiness is the key to life

The prophet Zephaniah offers a picture of the way God can be experienced by his people. He imagines I coming to us in the midst of a celebration overflowing with the joy of salvation…*The Lord, your God is in your midst, a warrior who gives you the victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing, as on a day of festival"* (**3:17**). This is what God wants for us, a way of living that is nothing short of life in the Garden of Eden prior to the introduction of sin. By truly living in God, through living our lives in imitation of Christ, we experience Joy.

This is the joy we should be experiencing daily, amid the little things of life, as a response to the loving invitation of God our Father. There is nothing but love for us beaming out of the divine heart: *My child, treat yourself well, according to your means… Do not deprive yourself of the day's enjoyment* (**Sirach14:11, 14**).

With all of this forming the foundation of our lives of faith, why is it that we have so many Christians whose lives seem like Lent without Easter! Of course, this joy is not going to be always expressed in the same way in life, especially at moments of great difficulty, when strife and hardship seems to dominate our horizons. Joy adapts and changes, but it always endures, even if it is little more than a flicker of light born of our personal certainty that we are infinitely loved.

We should always be able to find divine solace in the scriptures. We all know the grief of people who have had to endure great suffering and darkness. Perhaps we have ourselves been in those situations. For men and women of faith, even there, in the midst of darkness, divine Joy is seeking a way into our hearts as we slowly but surely allow ourselves to be healed through faith.

The long-suffering prophet Jeremiah has spoken so eloquently of this process from his own experiences…*My soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is… But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness… It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord* (***Lam* 3:17, 21-23, 26**).

With this kind of guarantee, why is it then that we are tempted to find excuses and complain, acting as if we could only be happy if a thousand conditions were met? That we can only be happy once xy and z are achieved? Is it because our technological society has succeeded in multiplying occasions of pleasure, yet has found it very difficult, if not impossible to engender joy? How then is this Joy possible? Only through an authentic faith.

Authentic, enduring Christian discipleship

The reality easily forgotten is that being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but from an encounter with an event, a person, one who gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.

A renewed encounter with God's love, blossoms into an enriching friendship, and in that relationship, we are liberated from our narrowness and self-absorption. Here is a kind of conundrum: We become fully human when we become more than human, that is, when we let God bring us beyond ourselves. This in turn becomes the impetus for mission: if we have received the love which restores meaning to our lives, how can we fail to share that love with others?

The Word of God constantly shows us the way God challenges those who believe in him "*to go forth*". It is therefore incumbent on all Christians and every faith community to discern the path that the Lord points out for us. We are called upon to obey his call *to go forth* from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the peoples in need of the light of the Gospel. That is Joy. In so doing, let us be reminded that the Gospel joy enlivening the community of disciples is a missionary Joy. This is what the seventy-two disciples felt it as they returned from their mission (**cf. Lk 10:17**).

The Church which "*goes forth*" is a community of missionary disciples who take the first step, who are involved and supportive, who bear fruit and rejoice. This is because an evangelizing community knows that the Lord has taken the initiative, that he has loved us first (**1 Jn 4:19**), and therefore we can be bold, courageous; we can take the risk and move forward reaching out to others; we can seek those who have fallen away, who stand at life's crossroads and welcome the outcast. That is Joy.