

Lent with Ruth Burrows and Sister Wendy Beckett

WEEK FOUR: LIVING ALWAYS IN THE JOY OF GOD'S LOVE



What is true joy?

The Fourth Sunday of Lent is traditionally known as 'Laetare Sunday,' from the Latin phrase meaning 'let us rejoice.' We are invited to contemplate the meaning of joy in the light of the Passion.

Here, Ruth Burrows and Sister Wendy Beckett help us to enter into the deep truth of Christian joy.

Christian joy is no mere emotion even though it may, and often does, overflow into our emotional experience. Christian joy is a virtue. It is a sharing in the very joy of Jesus. Joy in the Father's love for Him and His love for the Father was with Jesus even in the anguish of His mortal life, and it is now His in its fullness.

This blessed relationship of love we also share. We are God's sons and daughters, caught up in His heart, loved with an unspeakable love. This is our joy. Nothing can separate us from the love which comes to us in Christ Jesus our Lord. This joy can transcend anything the world can present in the way of pain and sorrow.

There can be no true joy until we can look death serenely in the face; and not only death as the instant which closes our mortal life but all those partial dyings which are ours and which wring our hearts.

Such things as fear, pain, sickness and failing physical strength; traces of age on a beloved face, the last look at a place we love and shall never see again; every parting, every forgetfulness, just the sight of a fading flower - all these bring the breath of death and anguish to our sensitive hearts. But faith in Jesus, the conqueror of death, in Jesus who, through His resurrection has given to all that seems negative and death-dealing a positive value, can enable us to rise above these afflictions and find true joy.

To some extent we can by numerous diversions and distractions keep at bay the experience of death which, without faith in Jesus, can eat away life's spirit; but such a state of peace and contentment would be superficial and could easily lead to callousness. We must pray to be granted gentle, loving, sensitive hearts, aware of the needs of others, and this means co-passion, co-suffering. Yet no suffering must rob us of joy.

Always by faith we must see the power of the resurrection at work. Our joy must proclaim redemption and resurrection to the world. What greater witness can there be than a joy which transcends all pain?

Ruth Burrows, *Through Him, With Him, In Him*, 105-106.

What does it mean to live in joy and trust when the sky is darkened and our universe is desolate - whatever that might mean for us?
Sister Wendy explores this question in her reflection on
Ken Kiff's painting "Flower and Black Sky"



Ken Kiff, "Flower and Black Sky"

Here, if ever, is a picture to be contemplated rather than discussed. It scarcely seems to have made it into material existence. One side of the paper is ragged and torn, and the edges wobble as if under the pressure of Ken Kiff's emotion. The flower stands alone in a lifeless landscape. To the left is a skeletal tree, pale green like an enlarged branch of seaweed, waving its dead branches desperately in all directions, and in vain.

To the right, low in the black sky, the sun is visible and yet gives no light. It is a sun of faith, a willed sun overpowered by the darkness and still holding its place, waiting, keeping faith in powerlessness.

The small flower is not dismayed. In an unmistakably anthropomorphic gesture, it raises its leaf hands in prayer, it raises its flowerhead in trust. The praying hands do not implore, but rather seem to jubilate. Incredibly, the flower almost orchestrates a hymn of jubilation. Like a conductor, the leaves rise to summon invisible players and singers.

However black the sky, the flower is totally assured of life's essential joy. Silently, as it lifts up those hopeful leaves, it appears to draw into being a cloud of luminous vapour. Only where the flower is, in the presence of its trustful prayer, is the radiance apparent.

Perhaps Kiff suggests that there can be no total darkness for the believing heart? Out of nothingness, light will arise, almost of its own accord. The darker the background, the drearier the prospect, the brighter shines the faith and hope of the believing heart. It calls on a strength not its own - a far stronger creature, the tree, has succumbed. No, it is at peace and in joy because prayer is the certainty of God's love, and with that as our happiness we can live confidently under a darkened sun and in a desolate universe.