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Published in the Church Times 1 April 2010

Be more surprised by joy

*Christians would find more joy if they opened themselves to new and challenging experiences, argues **James Woodward***

I WANT to share the surprise of joy I experienced in a moment of spiritual awareness at an Easter vigil. This forms part of a conviction that Easter Christians always entertain the possibility of joy when being open to the new.

It was Easter morning 1984. I had journeyed through Lent and Holy Week, and listened and prayed a familiar story. We gathered in a convent chapel in the countryside in the darkness to celebrate the resurrection of Christ. In some brief seconds, something remarkable happened. As the priest lifted the communion vessels, I became aware that the darkness had given way to morning.

The sun rose, and light filled the chapel. By the time we said the Lord's Prayer, we were joined by the birds in a chorus of sound. The ordinary cycle of night and day took on a new meaning — we experienced what we were proclaiming.

Darkness had given way to light; Christ conquered death. The new life of Christ was made present in the broken bread and outpoured wine. It was an experience of profound joy, quiet but clear, light but holy.

The celebration of life offered in this Easter eucharist was transformative — a brief moment of pure joy that has carried me through many times of perplexity. That moment was a movement of experiencing truth. I began to absorb in head and heart the powerful love that God offers us in Christ.

The Christian story is built on joy. We are and should be a people who overflow with joy. This is a by-product of the deep gratitude that we all experience when we realise how much God loves us, and when we accept God's invitation to become integral characters in God's story. Joy is a consequence of our sense of the wonder of God's presence with us.

It was Nietzsche, the son of a minister, who expressed concern about how we live out the Easter message: "His disciples should look more redeemed." A visit to our churches this weekend may give us foundation for this criticism.

Many Christians are surrounded by an air of heaviness, of a lack of humour and irony about themselves. It would be helpful to find time for the transforming possibilities of worship, and to give more time to be aware of the power of love and joy.

This is not escapism. We know that in this life, little is certain. It is hard to keep the faith in a materialistic and distracted world. Easter joy asks us to redraw our lives into a new way of seeing. This envisioning might happen when we consider how we understand God, and where we look for the presence of God.

We could spend more time with scripture, preparing for our Sunday worship; more time in silence, and in giving expression to the parts of our lives that give us cause for delight. Often I place in my prayer book a list of the things that lift my heart to joy. God can speak to us in these small actions.

We can also nurture joy by embracing doubt and honesty. For all of us, there are aspects of faith which can feel fragile. As we are receptive to our questions about discipleship, this fosters an openness that can be a springboard into a deeper wisdom. Those early disciples found their dawning of joy and release spilled out of their anguish and searching.

We might want to share our spiritual journey in conversation with others, building up the trust to discover and be surprised by listening to each other. God meets us in the tapestry of our living, and can work creatively through this.

Joy is born out of union with reality, especially when we open ourselves up to the unfamiliar. This may include getting to know other Christians in different circumstances from our own, at home or abroad. It might mean opening up ourselves to something new in worship, whether in music or ways of praying.

We Christians do not embrace new ideas easily. As John Henry Newman said: “Growth is the only evidence of life,” and “to be perfect will be to have changed often.” How odd, then, that people pride themselves on the fixity of their beliefs.

Joy might be about being ready for surprises. When discoveries about human nature come to us, they usually come from the outside, and our new experience challenges us to change. That Easter eucharist taught me that nurturing faith is as much a matter of the heart as the intellect. Many have found in religious art a way into a deeper comprehension of how the story of Christ can shape us.

We should look afresh, so that things can dawn on us. My recent exposure to the rich tradition of choral music has unfolded the way in which sound brings the world alive in new ways from moment to moment. Spending time looking — and waiting and being — opens the doors of perception. We should put ourselves in difficult places and conversations, where the risk of challenge and change is possible.

This might mean looking at our own “Good Friday” wounds as part of learning to live with whatever has hurt us in the past. In contemplating these — perhaps love lost, mistaken choices, hurts caused — we learn to mend, and have courage to move on.

The obvious place to open ourselves up to this joyful resurrection life is through our affinity with creation. But that change can also emerge from the honesty of our struggle with everyday living, people, and modernity. We might find nobility in the estate of identical homes, dignity in the plea of the Big Issue-seller, and community among the commuters distracted by their mobile phones. In this crucible of life, God will bless us as we wrestle with a disturbing idea.

The element of joy in religion is prominent in the New Testament. Matthew 5.12 asks us to rejoice and be glad (see also John 15.11 and 17.13, Philippians 1.25, and 1

Peter 1.8). It provides the foundation for happiness, and is present in all levels of our striving for fulfilment. It requires a movement of heart and will — a choice to nurture this gift in ourselves and others. It can emerge out of our struggle.

We must be prepared to be surprised by the possibilities of our Emmaus journey. The stranger might lead us in unexpected ways of knowing. Our vulnerable hearts are the places where joy springs and informs the intellect. The joy of life is possible in ecstasy and sorrow. It can surprise us when we open ourselves up for change.