

By Father Charles Bowes

Isaiah 61:1-2a, 10-11
1 Thessalonians 5:16-24
John 1:6-8 19-28

Even in the midst of pain, there is hope.

What is it like to lose your father when you are a five year-old boy, especially if you never knew he was seriously ill? And your life has been reasonably carefree up until that time? Your small world collapses. Russell Baker, columnist for the *New York Times*, went through that sad experience and writes of it in his well-known autobiography entitled *Growing Up*.

The five year-old could not understand his father's death, and he turned to his mother, whom everyone called Bessie. Looking back on the painful experience, Baker wrote, "Bessie said I would understand someday, but she was only partly right. That afternoon - though I couldn't have phrased it this way then - I decided that God was a lot less interested in people in Morrisonville than they were willing to admit. That day, I decided that God was not entirely to be trusted. After that, I never cried again with any real conviction, nor expected much of anyone's God except indifference, nor loved deeply without fear that it would cost me dearly in pain. At the age of five, I had

become a skeptic and began to sense that any happiness that came my way might be the prelude to some grim cosmic joke."

Now that's a jolting passage, isn't it? Usually we expect a child to snap out of it, to be wildly excited, even the day after the funeral, by a baseball game or new puppy. Life must go on, we tell each other, and it seems easy for most children to go on, but not for all. For Baker, it all changed when he was five.

Don't a lot of folks have trouble with the Christmas season precisely because of pain of loss which is magnified by the near-mandatory happiness of the season? But do we have to go through life with this kind of skepticism, keeping happiness at arm's length? Does that really protect us from future sadness?

Apparently the prophet today, Isaiah 61, did not think so. He says, "I rejoice heartily in my Lord, in the God who is the joy of my soul." Apparently the evangelist and the mother of Jesus did not think so because we hear, in the responsorial verses, that exultant refrain of Mary's song, "My soul rejoices in my God, and my spirit finds joy in God my savior." The apostle says simply, "Rejoice always."

But is all this so much religious talk, for pious people? There is a danger that we agree with it only because we are in church and are expected to agree.

When we leave for the world it doesn't sound realistic – to love your enemy, forgive seventy times seven, pray always – or, go about full of joy, as if the world were not a very threatening place. When we leave church for the world, the “communion” does not last – the communion that we have had with God and with each other. We become customers and competitors, bosses and employees, and sometimes a house divided, a quarreling family. Joy is not constant in our lives. Sin upsets it too much and misery lurks around the corner.

So, do we agree with Baker's conclusion that all our happiness – sitting around the table, enjoying food and each other, even the happiness of love and children and the thrill of accomplishment – is all this “the prelude to some grim cosmic joke”?

No, it isn't. It is the prelude to some great cosmic surprise. To put it very simply, we will be “surprised by joy” and discover that our earthly happiness, all our glad moments, have been no more than hints of the real thing, the undiminished happiness to come. Mary sang (and we repeated her words today): “Rejoice in the Lord!” We rejoice in a lot of other things, lesser things. Look at the joy of football players pounding each other when the big game is won. Look at children, eyes big with wonder, on Christmas morning. Look at the joy we have in our children – and in each other. But we don't have to be philosophers to know that “this too shall pass.” Football players have as many defeats as victories. And some of us live with only memories of Christmas past. As for children, they grow up and grow away. And even the dearest joy of love is overshadowed, if not by sin, surely by death. Our joys cannot last except – in the One who abides. In Him, all our broken toys and broken lives are put back together.

We celebrate that faith here and find nourishment in word and one another and in this holy food and drink.

In a speech he gave in March of this year, the executive director of Amnesty International U.S.A., William F. Schulz, told a story that catches something of what this holy season is about in the face of cynicism and sadness: “When Winnie the Pooh was stuck in the doorway of Rabbit's house, he was stuck so tightly that he couldn't even sigh, and a tear rolled down his cheek. And then Pooh made a request, a small but reasonable request, not for a crowbar to get him out – no, not that, but for something else: ‘Would you be so kind,’ Pooh asked, ‘as to read a Sustaining Book, such as would help and comfort a Wedged Bear in a Great Tightness.’”

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