



St Paul wrote to the community in the city of Philippi at a time when he himself was being persecuted and in serious difficulties. Yet he advised these dear friends of his, in fact he almost commanded them, to 'rejoice in the Lord always'.

Is it right to command this kind of thing?

Looking at the world around us, there are not that many reasons for feeling good about life, never mind joyful!

With all the worries we have, the social injustice and strained relationships between nations, it's already hard work not letting ourselves be overwhelmed and discouraged, and therefore just live for ourselves.

Nonetheless, we hear Paul's invitation to:

***'Rejoice in the Lord always'***

What was his secret?

Chiara Lubich wrote: 'There is a reason why, despite all our difficulties, we should always be joyful. If we take Christian life seriously, it gives us joy. Through Christian life, Jesus lives fully within us and when we are with him we cannot fail to be joyful. He is the source of true joy, because he gives meaning to our life and guides us with his light. He frees us from fear, whether we are concerned about the past or about something yet to come. He gives us the strength to overcome all the difficulties, temptations and trials that we might encounter.'

Christian joy is not simple optimism, nor is it the security given by material wellbeing. It isn't the cheeriness of those who are young and healthy. Instead it is the fruit of a personal meeting with God in the depths of our hearts.

***'Rejoice in the Lord always'***

Paul went on to say that this joy enables us to welcome others in a kindly way and be ready to use our time for others.

Moreover, on another occasion, Paul referred explicitly to Jesus' saying, 'there is more joy in giving than in receiving'.

Being in Jesus' company gives us peace of heart, which can positively influence the people around us with its 'unarmed' power.

Not long ago, despite the dangers and problems of the war, a large group of Syrian young people met together to share their experiences of living the Gospel and experiencing the joy of mutual love. They went home again determined to witness that it is possible to live as one family.

We were sent this feedback by one of the people who had been there:

'We heard so many stories in which there was great pain, great hope and heroic faith in God's love. Some people have lost everything and the family was living in a refugee camp. Others saw their loved ones killed. These young people really want to help make a new start. They have organised festivals in different towns, involving thousands of people. They worked to rebuild a school, and a garden at the centre of a small village that had never been finished due to the war. They have helped many refugee families. The words of Chiara Lubich come to mind, "Christian joy is like a ray of sunlight shining through a tear, a rose flowering from blood-stained ground. It is the essence of love distilled from suffering. That is why it has the apostolic power of a glimpse of Paradise." In these Syrian brothers and sisters of ours, we saw the fortitude of the first Christians in the way they witness, during this terrible war, to their trust and hope in God who is Love. Their witness helps their friends have the same trust and hope. Thank you, Syrian friends, for this lesson in lived Christianity!'

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