Cheerfulness

Zechariah 8; Romans 12:3-15

(preached at Somervell on 24 April 2016)

In the Dr Who episode entitled, ‘Blink,’ Sally Sparrow is taking her friend, Kathy Nightingale, to see an old, abandoned house that she had been exploring the previous day. As they enter the house Kathy asks, ‘What did you come here for, anyway?’

‘I love old things. They make me feel sad,’ Sally replies.

‘What’s good about sad?’ (Kathy)

‘It’s happy for deep people.’ (Sally)

I am, by temperament, quite like Sally. A comedy can be a pleasant enough diversion. But real art is tragic. It shows you where the world is broken. That is an exaggeration, of course. Great art can take any number of forms. But I am naturally drawn toward art that is sad. When I was in graduate school, the radio station I listened to on my hour-and-twenty-minute drive to campus played a number of songs by The Wallflowers. One of my favourites was ‘Hand Me Down,’ which begins, ‘You won’t ever amount to much. You won’t be anyone. Now tell me what you were thinking of. How could you think you would be enough? It’s not that you have stayed too long, and it’s not that you’ve done something wrong. It’s not your fault that you embarass us all. You’re a hand me down. It’s better when you’re not around. You feel good and you look like you should. But you won’t ever make us proud.’ One of the reasons I like it is because it is such a sad song. What makes it even sadder is that The Wallflowers’ lead singer is Jakob Dylan, Bob Dylan’s son. I don’t know that Jakob had his relationship with his famous father in mind when he wrote it, but that’s the backdrop against which I hear the song. And as I do I feel a profound sadness that human beings do this sort of thing to one another. Even when we are not at war and are not breaking any laws, we can still leave scars that may never heal.

Given my melancholy nature, it is not surprising that Kaila responded as she did when I said I was going to be speaking about cheerfulness. She quipped, ‘Are you going to subtitle it, “An Outsider’s View”?’ Perhaps I should. But even if I don’t know what cheerfulness looks like from the inside, I know what it looks like at close range. My father is a cheerful soul and I have spent 45 years observing him.

Cheerfulness is not discussed much in contemporary philosophy or theology. However, in the 17th and 18th centuries it was widely regarded as an important moral trait. That view was shaped in no small part by their reading of the Bible. There are 17 occurrences of ‘cheer’, ‘cheerful’, and derivatives in the King James translation of the Bible. These 17 occurrences do not all reflect a single term in Greek or Hebrew. In fact, there are 4 different Hebrew terms and an additional 3 Greek words that are translated by ‘cheer,’ ‘cheerful,’ and their derivatives. The best way to get a sense of what they meant by cheerfulness is to look at a couple of passages in which it is discussed. This morning you have seen or heard three: the proverb on the front of the order of service (Proverbs 15:13), Zechariah 8, and Romans 12.

Let us begin with Zechariah. To appreciate the passage we just read we need a bit of context. Jerusalem had been sacked, the Temple destroyed, and many of the inhabitants who didn’t die in the assault were dragged off to live in exile in Babylon. There they remained for the next 70 years, until finally Cyrus gave them permission to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple. Zechariah is writing during the period of rebuilding, which we know from other books of the Bible was not a quick or easy affair. It went in fits and starts. At the time Zechariah was writing the worship of Yahweh in a restored temple was still the dream of a distant future. But it is a beautiful, hope-filled dream.

Rather than living in subsistence conditions where young and old are most at risk, in the future he promises their city will be filled both with those who have lived long lives and with numerous children. Rather than being anxious about being attacked by neighbours because the city’s wall has not yet been rebuilt, in the future the peace with the city’s neighbours will be so secure that the city can spread in all directions without any need for a wall. Rather than being strangers in a strange land, they will have a place to call their own. Rather than being looked down upon as poor, backward losers, at best, or enemies, at worst, anyone who comes from Jerusalem or who worships Yahweh will be treated as a celebrity by their neighbours, who will be eager to join them in worshiping Yahweh. In the midst of this future peace and prosperity, the fasting days they used to observe when they were in Babylon will be turned to ‘seasons of joy and gladness, and cheerful festivals for the house of Judah’ (Zech 8:19). And there is every reason to expect the holiday cheer – the merriment associated with a joyful celebration – will not end with the festival but will continue even between festivals. Because God has ‘purposed to do good to Jerusalem and to the house of Judah’ (Zech 8:15).

When I told one of my colleagues that I would be talking about cheerfulness, he asked, ‘Is cheerfulness appropriate any longer for those of us who live after the atrocities of the 20th century?’ It is a reasonable question to ask, particularly this weekend as we remember those who died at Gallipoli. And it is compounded by the fact that we don’t have a prophet promising us that all will be well. Answering this question will give us a better sense of what cheerfulness is and of why it is a trait worth cultivating.

The first thing to note is that human beings have known how to ruin one another’s lives for a very long time. The 20th century’s wars were remarkable for how many people were killed in one place at one time. But the 6th century B.C. had its share of devastating battles and attempted genocides. It is not clear that the 20th century was any worse in this regard than previous centuries, and in some respects it was better. So if there was room for cheer in Zechariah’s day, there should be room in ours, as well.

The second thing to note is that most of the conditions that were part of Zechariah’s dream of a better future are things that we enjoy in our society. We have a multi-generational society with quality child and elder-care, healthy food and clean water is available to most in our society, and because we enjoy peace with our neighbours our cities can extend in all directions without walls. We are living Zechariah’s dream.

The third thing to observe is that Zechariah is talking about cheerful moments, but there may be a difference between cheerful moments and the steady disposition of cheerfulness that a person might possess even when they are not on holiday. And in fact there is. We can get a glimpse of this in the passage we read from Romans 12. Did you notice who excelled in cheerfulness? It was the compassionate, those who feel passion with others, that is, those who ‘rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep’ (Rom 12:15). So the quality we are talking about is not the blind optimism of Voltaire’s Professor Pangloss, who keeps his spirits up by ignoring or explaining away tragic events in the world around him.

What distinguishes the cheerful is not that they fail to see the bad. What distinguishes them is that they do not let the bad prevent them from seeing the good. This is not an easy thing to do. Our news outlets feed us a much steadier diet of tragic than of joyous news. If those of us who are, by temperament, absorbed by the sad wish to cultivate cheerfulness, we will have to be intentional about it. We cannot expect the good to be the subject of many feature stories. We shall have to go looking for it.

How can we become more cheerful? A useful first step down that road is to begin by reflecting on things for which you are grateful at the end of each day. If we cannot recognize and celebrate goods in our own lives, we will have a hard time recognizing them in other’s lives and rejoicing with them. I know I have posed this challenge before, but I am going to pose it again. The challenge is to write down 5 things for which you are grateful at the end of each day for the next fortnight – or if you are really up for a challenge, for the next month. Each day’s list must differ from the others for that week.

The last thing to note about cheerfulness is that it is not just about how we feel. It is also – and perhaps more importantly – about how we make others feel. Do we help them recognize and celebrate the good and bear up under the bad? Or do we dwell on the bad and overlook the goods along our path – the flavour of the ripe feijoa, morning sunlight, the smile of a friend, shelter from the rain?

May God grant us eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts to celebrate the goodness of our world.