

John Henry Newman
(1801-1890)

John Henry Newman's *Parochial and Plain Sermons* originally ran to eight volumes, though they are now available in one. They were preached when Newman was an Anglican, from the pulpit of the Church of St. Mary the Virgin, in Oxford, on Sundays and feast days. Most of the Christian themes that Newman would explore over his lifetime are treated in these sermons, which show his intellectual power, his poetic streak, and his moral and spiritual backbone.

It is worth noting that in his later years Newman avoided the kind of religious partisanship that he thought might give offense to the Church of England. When other Roman Catholics wanted him to take the lead in founding a Catholic college at Oxford, Newman was not eager to do so. Oxford University was the bastion of Anglicanism; Newman did not want to appear to be baiting the Anglicans. By now Catholic students were readily entering the various Oxford colleges, and certain religious biases against Roman Catholics were beginning to fade. Newman did not want to prolong that misery.

Although a great part of his contribution to thought and ideas came out of religious controversy, it seems likely that the role of controversialist was thrust upon him. Newman's great preoccupation was with the truths of Christianity as he saw them.

He worried more about skepticism and what we would now call secularism than about the differences between Protestants and Catholics.

In the following selections, which are taken from *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, Newman helps us to practice the discipline of celebration. The first, "Religious Joy," is a Christmas sermon (Book 8, Sermon 17); the second, "Christ, a Quickening Spirit," is an Easter sermon (Book 2, Sermon 13). Notice how Newman urges us to be cheerful and good-tempered and continually reminds us that the knowledge of our salvation should help us in this. God's love, he suggests, should "sweep away the vexations of life by its own richness and strength."

Sometimes, he suggests, our rejoicing should be sober and subdued. Even then, our peace and joy will be even fuller because of that seriousness.

PAROCHIAL AND PLAIN SERMONS

Religious Joy

"And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord." (Luke 2:10-11)

There are two principal lessons which we are taught on the great Festival which we this day celebrate, lowliness and joy. This surely is a day, of all others, in which is set before us the heavenly excellence and the acceptableness in God's sight of that state which most men have, or may have, allotted to them, humble or private life, and cheerfulness in it. If we consult the writings of historians, philosophers, and poets of this world, we shall be led to think great men happy; we shall be led to fix our minds and hearts upon high or conspicuous stations, strange adventures, powerful talents to cope with them, memorable struggles, and great destinies. We shall consider that the highest course of life is the mere pursuit, not the enjoyment of good.

But when we think of this day's Festival, and what we commemorate upon it, a new and very different scene opens upon us. First, we are reminded that though this life must ever be a life of toil and effort, yet that, properly speaking, we have not to seek our highest good. It is found, it is brought near us, in the descent of the Son of God from His Father's bosom to this world. It is stored up among us on earth. No longer need men of ardent minds weary themselves in the pursuit of what they fancy may be chief goods; no longer have they to wander about and encounter peril in quest of that unknown blessedness to which their hearts naturally aspire, as they did in heathen times. The text speaks to them and to all, "Unto you," it says, "is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord."

Nor, again, need we go in quest of any of those things which this vain world calls great and noble. Christ altogether dishonoured what the world esteems, when He took on Himself a rank and station which the world despises. No lot could be more humble and more ordinary than that which the Son of God chose for Himself.

So that we have on the Feast of the Nativity these two lessons – instead of anxiety within and despondence without, instead of a weary search after great things, – to be cheerful and joyful; and, again, to be so in the midst of those obscure and ordinary circumstances of life which the world passes over and thinks scorn of..

Great Joy

"Fear not," said the Angel, "for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord." And then, when he had finished his announcement, "suddenly there was with the Angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will towards men." Such were the words which the blessed Spirits who minister to Christ and His Saints, spoke on that gracious night to the shepherds, to rouse them out of their cold and famished mood into great joy; to teach them that they were objects of God's love as much as the greatest of men on earth; nay more so, for to them first He had imparted the news of what that night was happening. His Son was then born into the world. Such events are told to friends and intimates, to those whom we love, to those who will sympathize with us, not to strangers. How could Almighty God be more gracious, and show His favour more impressively to the lowly and the friendless, than by hastening (if I may use the term) to confide the great, the joyful secret to the shepherds keeping watch over their sheep by night?

The Angel then gave the first lesson of mingled humility and joyfulness; but an infinitely greater one was behind in the event itself, to which he directed the shepherds, in that birth itself of the Holy Child Jesus. This he intimated in these words: "Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger." Doubtless, when they heard the Lord's Christ was born into the world, they would look for Him in kings' palaces. They would not be able to fancy that He had become one of themselves, or that they might approach Him; therefore the Angel thus warned them where to find Him, not only as a sign, but as a lesson also.

Great Mystery

"The shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known to us." Let us too go with them, to contemplate that second and greater miracle to which the Angel directed them, the Nativity of Christ. St. Luke says of the Blessed Virgin, "She brought forth her first-born Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger." What a wonderful sign is this to all the world, and therefore the Angel repeated it to the shepherds: "Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger." The God of heaven and earth, the Divine Word, who had been in glory with the Eternal Father from the beginning, He was at this time born into this world of sin as a little infant. He, as at this time, lay in His mother's arms, to all appearance helpless and powerless, and was wrapped by Mary in an infant's bands, and

laid to sleep in a manger. The Son of God Most High, who created the worlds, became flesh, though remaining what He was before. He became flesh as truly as if He had ceased to be what He was, and had actually been changed into flesh. He submitted to be the offspring of Mary, to be taken up in the hands of a mortal, to have a mother's eye fixed upon Him, and to be cherished at a mother's bosom. A daughter of man became the Mother of God – to her, indeed, an unspeakable gift of grace; but in Him what condescension! What an emptying of His glory to become man! and not only a helpless infant, though that were humiliation enough, but to inherit all the infirmities and imperfections of our nature which were possible to a sinless soul. What were His thoughts, if we may venture to use such language or admit such a reflection concerning the Infinite, when human feelings, human sorrows, human wants, first became His? What a mystery is there from first to last in the Son of God becoming man! Yet in proportion to the mystery is the grace and mercy of it; and as is the grace, so is the greatness of the fruit of it...

Rejoice in the Lord

Take these thoughts with you, my brethren, to your homes on this festive day; let them be with you in your family and social meetings. It is a day of joy: it is good to be joyful – it is wrong to be otherwise. For one day we may put off the burden of our polluted consciences, and rejoice in the perfections of our Saviour Christ, without thinking of ourselves, without thinking of our own miserable uncleanness; but contemplating His glory, His righteousness, His purity, His majesty, His overflowing love. We may rejoice in the Lord, and in all His creatures see Him. We may enjoy His temporal bounty, and partake the pleasant things of earth with Him in our thoughts; we may rejoice in our friends for His sake, loving them most especially because He has loved them.

"God has not appointed us unto wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, that whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with Him" (1 Thess. 5:9-10). Let us seek the grace of a cheerful heart, an even temper, sweetness, gentleness, and brightness of mind, as walking in His light, and by His grace. Let us pray Him to give us the spirit of ever-abundant, ever-springing love, which overpowers and sweeps away the vexations of life by its own richness and strength, and which above all things unites us to Him who is the fountain and the centre of all mercy, loving kindness, and joy.

Christ, A Quickening Spirit

O blessed day of the Resurrection, which of old time was called the Queen of Festivals, and raised among Christians an anxious, nay contentious diligence duly to honour it! Blessed day, once only passed in sorrow, when the Lord actually rose, and the disciples believed not; but ever since a day of joy to the faith and love of the Church!

In ancient times, Christians all over the world began it with a morning salutation. Each man said to his neighbour, "Christ is risen"; and his neighbour answered him, "Christ is risen indeed, and hath appeared unto Simon."

Even to Simon, the coward disciple who denied Him thrice, Christ is risen; even to us, who long ago vowed to obey Him, and have yet so often denied Him before men, so often taken part with sin, and followed the world, when Christ called us another way. "Christ is risen indeed, and hath appeared to Simon!" to Simon Peter the favoured Apostle, on whom the Church is built, Christ has appeared.

Christ Dispenses Blessings

He has appeared to His Holy Church first of all, and in the Church He dispenses blessings, such as the world knows not of.

Blessed are they if they knew their blessedness, who are allowed, as we are, week after week, and Festival after Festival, to seek and find in that Holy Church the Saviour of their souls! ...

But we, who trust that so far we are doing God's will, inasmuch as we are keeping to those ordinances and rules which His Son has left us, we may humbly rejoice in this day, with a joy the world cannot take away, any more than it can understand.

Truly, in this time of rebuke and blasphemy, we cannot but be sober and subdued in our rejoicing; yet our peace and joy may be deeper and fuller even for that very seriousness. For nothing can harm those who bear Christ within them. Trial or temptation, time of tribulation, time of wealth, pain, bereavement, anxiety, sorrow, the insults of the enemy, the loss of worldly goods, nothing can "separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:30).

Christ Within Us

This the Apostle told us long since; but we, in this age of the world, over and above his word, have the experience of many centuries for our comfort. We have his own history to show us how Christ within us is stronger than the world around us, and will prevail. We have

the history of his fellow-sufferers, of all the Confessors and Martyrs of early times and since, to show us that Christ's arm "is not shortened, that it cannot save"; that faith and love have a real abiding-place on earth; that, come what will, His grace is sufficient for His Church, and His strength made perfect in weakness; that, "even to old age, and to hoar hairs, He will carry and deliver" her; that, in whatever time the powers of evil give challenge, Martyrs and Saints will start forth again, and rise from the dead, as plentiful as though they had never been before, even "the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the Word of God, and which had not worshipped the beast, neither his image, neither had received his mark upon their foreheads, or in their hands" (Rev. 20:4).

Meantime, while Satan only threatens, let us possess our hearts in patience; try to keep quiet; aim at obeying God, in all things, little as well as great; do the duties of our calling which lie before us, day by day; and "take no thought for the morrow, for sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof" (Matt. 6:34).

BIBLE SELECTION

1 Peter 1:3-9 (NRSV)

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

BREATH PRAYER

(Inhale) "Jesus, my living hope ..."

(Exhale) "... I rejoice in you."

JOURNAL QUESTIONS

1. Are there specific practices that Christians can adopt to uplift their spirits and maintain cheerfulness, even amidst challenging circumstances?
2. How can I nurture a sense of celebration and joy in the midst of everyday routines?
3. Optional Stretch Exercise: Host a Christmas or Easter celebration on any chosen day or evening throughout the year. Play festive music associated with these occasions and offer refreshments to create a joyous atmosphere. Additionally, consider incorporating customs such as almsgiving, where you donate to those in need, as a meaningful way to embrace the spirit of giving and compassion.

REFLECTIONS FROM RICHARD J. FOSTER

It is instructive, isn't it, this juxtaposition of a Christmas sermon and an Easter sermon? Birth and resurrection – an interesting comparison and contrast.

Swaddling clothes and a manger are the symbols of Christ's birth. Powerful symbols. Remember the manger was a feeding trough for animals, and swaddling clothes were the poor's means of dressing and diapering their young. In these symbols God sanctified the ordinary, intertwined the sacred with the secular, wedded the spiritual to the material.

The symbol of the resurrection is an empty tomb. Interesting, isn't it, that even in the most explosive spiritual reality in human history God gives us a material sign, an empty tomb? Just like at Christmas.

But the contrasts are even more striking than the comparisons. Christmas is a condensation, Easter is a conquest. Christmas is a humbling, Easter is a triumph. These are not in opposition to each other, you understand, only the double rhythm of divine kenosis and dunamis.

Of the two festivals Easter is the greater. As Newman reminds us it used to be called "the Queen of Festivals" That is not to speak disparagingly of Christmas; it is only to remind us to keep our focus on the center of our faith. Christmas does not speak the final word of Christian witness. That word is reserved for Easter: "Christ is risen." He is risen indeed!

Excerpts taken from *Spiritual Classics: Selected Readings on the Twelve Spiritual Disciplines* (Richard Foster and Emilie Griffin, Editors. Harpercollins, 2000.)