

**Choral Holy Communion
Third Sunday After Trinity
I Peter 5:5-11
Luke 15:1-10**

Do you think of yourself as bringing joy to God? As much as the familiar words and the music of Holy Communion according to the Book of Common Prayer are beautiful, they don't speak much of joy, more often speaking of our unworthiness to come before God. We could be left with a picture of a God who grudgingly lets us off the hook because we have said the right words in the right order and in the right voice! This would be an incorrect picture, and certainly not one we could gain from our parables this evening.

There are, however, echoes of the author I Peter in the way we approach Holy Communion according to the BCP. Peter is heavy on humility; he wants us to be grounded in the view that we have of ourselves. To be fair, the BCP helps us with that, probably a bit too much: miserable offenders, manifold sins and wickedness and intolerable burdens all keep us in our place. Perhaps a bit too much, because Peter really wants our humility to be grounded in God's goodness. Cast all your anxieties on God he says, that is complete humility, when you and I recognise and admit that we can't add another minute to the day by worrying, that we do not hold the universe in our hands.

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It is that humility that helps us to see the evil around us as the roaring lion, noisy, fierce, and devouring; Peter paints a good picture of the world we find ourselves in. This isn't a personified evil, a devil, or a Satan, this is the malice and evil that surrounds us, this is the personification of our manifold sins and wickedness, a roaring lion seeking to devour us.

The Desert Fathers, those monks and priests who fled the corruption of a newly powerful and rich Church for the caves of the Egyptian desert in the fourth century knew what it was to try to tame this lion, not only an external lion but all the internal lions that would have us for a snack given a chance. Abba Moses the Ethiopian knew the way to victory here, he said, "you fast, but Satan does not eat. You labour fervently, but Satan never sleeps. The only dimension with which you can outperform Satan is by acquiring humility, for Satan has no humility."¹ Humility is the great lion tamer.

And with the image of the lion, we are led back to the sheep and the shepherd. David the shepherd king who fought lions and tigers and bears, oh my! To the

¹ Our Church Speaks, Instagram

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Shepherd King himself, Jesus Christ, who in these parables of the lost and found paints a picture of a joyous God, joyous over you and joyous over me.

Luke has a message he wants to get across, a distinction he needs to make.

The sinners and the publicans versus the Pharisees and the Scribes. The hearing of the former and the murmuring of the latter. The acceptance of those who are outside and the rejection of those who saw themselves inside.

Hearing throughout Luke's gospel is a sign of conversion, hearing always comes first. No wonder then that the first word of St Benedict's Rule is, "listen."

Conversion can only come when we hear, and for Benedict, conversion is something we all need daily. It is that which leads to God's joy.

The murmuring of the Pharisees and the Scribes is put in contrast with the joy of God. They cannot fathom the awesome grace of God, perhaps they do not even want to. It is also interesting that Benedict's rule warns against 'murmerers' and 'murmuring'. That he says is the enemy of conversion. But hearing opens us up to the possibility of all of God's goodness and grace. It allows us to be found and rejoiced over.

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And what better image than being thrown over the Shepherd's shoulder, cast all your anxieties on him because he's thrown you on his shoulder already. This isn't a grudging, half-hearted dragging to safety, this is a joyous grasping, holding and throwing over the shoulders to hold us close, carry us, bear us and our anxieties because we are loved and found. And in our being found is God's joy.

Whatever you came in carrying tonight, hear God's joy over you, know that in this sacrament, in this encounter with God you are the one who is carried, thrown over the shoulder of Christ, given the opportunity to cast all your anxieties on him as once again in bread and wine we are converted, changed into the likeness of Christ as God joys over us.