

Column

Christmas is about three months off, but there is no reason to reserve ‘merry’ for this season. No, Jesus’ followers should be people of celebration all year long.

A few years ago, I was in a conference in Charleston, S.C., at which the then Bishop of London Richard Chartres was one of the speakers. He opened his address by making this very point.

He said that when he opened the invitation to speak at this conference, he misread its title. Instead of seeing ‘Mere Anglicanism’ – the actual name of the event – he saw ‘Merry Anglicanism’.

Of course, he rescanned the title and got it right the second time round, but his initial point in his address was, why not? Why not be people of celebration? Why not be ‘merry Anglicans’?

Bishop Chartres’ point is well taken. Moreover, it extends beyond any particular ‘tribe’ of the Christian family. All who have given their allegiance to Jesus Christ -- be they Anglicans, Roman Catholics, Baptists or Methodists -- should have this family characteristic.

The Apostle Paul says as much when he charges believers in Philippi: “Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice” (Philippians 4:4). Tom Wright, retired Bishop of Durham, England, suggests that ‘rejoice’ in this verse could just as easily be translated ‘celebrate’.

Philippi was a Roman colony in northeastern Greece. In Paul’s day it was a place military veterans went to retire. It was also a place of many celebrations, some to the emperor, others to various gods and goddesses.

Paul’s point was that Christians in this city should be out on the street celebrating the true King and God – Jesus – with the same fervency and visibility. Of course, their celebration should not include the immorality and excesses associated with pagan feasts, but they should, if anything, be more joyful.

Why more joyful? Well, because what the pagans were celebrating were either not real or passing away. The One Christians celebrate, meanwhile, was the real deal. He and He alone could bring about the things for which they only longed: justice, peace and salvation.

Do Paul's words still hold? Yes, they do. We too need to be people of celebration. All around us are people longing for the same things as people in Paul's day. They want the wrongs of the world to be addressed. They want peace in their own home and in the world. They want deliverance from enemies seen and unseen, not the least at this time the scourge of the Coronavirus.

Christians work on the ground for all three – justice, peace and salvation - but they know their work is partial and anticipatory. The full realization of the Kingdom of God awaits the return of the King.

In the meantime, Christians don't build a cocoon around themselves and sit back and wait. No, they suffer along with the world and share in its pain (read Romans 8:18-25). The difference is they see light at the end of the tunnel. With Paul they can say, "For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (Romans 8:18).

This knowledge that history is going somewhere . . . we are not like children on a merry-go-round making circles . . . is what enables you and me, if we are believers, to be people of hope and celebration even in the darkest of times and the direst of circumstances.

Instead of reserving 'merry' for one season or day of the year, we say it by our words and deeds all year round. We can because we know the One who stands beside us in the midst of all life's storms and at the end of history.

What are you waiting for? Rejoice! Celebrate! Have a Jesus party!

LORD, we pray thee that thy grace may always prevent [go before] and follow us, and make us continually to be given to all good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Rev. Victor H. Morgan is rector of St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Blue Ridge.