Life in the raw: children in joy and despair
Children and Spirituality Symposium 12 September 2014
John Capper

Two things together shape the uniqueness of Christian thinking and living: a celebration of life as God’s gift; and a realistic optimistic view of death.

The view of death

The early Christians cared for others. It was an age when unwanted (often female) babies were exposed overnight on hillsides. Christians would seek, adopt and nurture any who survived. The bodies of the poor were collected by Christians would bury them. They also buried the bodies of babies who did not survive exposure.

This behaviour stood out in a world where life was cheap, short and often difficult. This respect, for the poor and for children, pointed to a view where everyone was valued. In a world where children might not be named until they were a few years old, for fear that they may not survive, this was a distinctive style. It rested on a view that all life is valuable. It was shaped by the knowledge that God's love was for all creation, without preference for particular humans, or classes of humans.

This view of death, too, pointed to the particular event of the death and resurrection of Jesus. No longer was death feared. Death was a part of a bigger view of life.

This legacy has shaped much of western civilisation. Life is valued. Children are given names. Medicine, education, protection and love are provided, so far as possible, for all people.

The celebration of life

Joy also characterises the Christian message.

Whilst joy and lament, alongside other dimensions of humanness, adorn the Psalms, joy takes off as a theme in the New Testament.

Luke’s Gospel has a penchant for joy. Joy is present at key points in the narrative. John the Baptist, it is said, will be a “joy and delight” to his parents (Lk 1:14) and leaps with joy in his mother’s womb when she meets the pregnant Mary of Nazareth. Before she gives birth, Jesus’ mother sings:

My soul glorifies the Lord
My spirit rejoices in God my saviour
…All generations will call me blessed (Lk 1:47ff.).

The angels appear to shepherds in glory and proclaim glad tidings of great joy (Lk 2:10). These are narrative devices with which we are familiar. They are profound in their
significance. The breaking into a broken world by a God of love is an act of grace and evokes joy in the creation.

Christianity is a religion of grounded joy. It is not escapist. It embraces and transforms suffering and grief.

**Mortality reality and joyful life**

The two together!

The three great monotheistic religions affirm victory over death. Christian faith alone brings celebration into the centre. Christian faith alone ascribes joy to the life of God (“Rejoice in the Lord!” Phil 4:4 and others; “The joy of the Lord is your strength.” Neh 8:10).

The two together are key to Christian faith (and to the life of Judaism, too). This little paper looks at what this means for ministry, and particularly what this means in the context of ministry to and with children.

**Joy and the (joyful humble) mission of Jesus**

After their mission exposure in three dozen pairs, Jesus’ apprentices “return with joy” and declared “Lord, even the demons submitted to us in your name.” Jesus responds, “Do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but that your names are written in heaven.” (Lk 10:17-21)

**Joyful like children**

Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, “I praise you Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes Father. This was your good pleasure.”

Revealed them to little children

It is hard to be childlike when you are being childish.

Yet Jesus affirms children not only by his encounters with them, such as in “the sending away of the adults” but through using them as positive role models of faith. (We could also consider the encounter with Nicodemus in John 3: “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” – perhaps not explicitly a negation of children but certainly no affirmation.)

The connection of joy and children – in Jesus’ encounter and in Jesus’ mission – is neat. Children do rejoicing, delight, fun, and abandon, well. We get taught, as we grow older, out

---

1 Elspeth Carr told me of her encounters with Nepali refugees interested to find out about Christian faith. After some time of reading stories from Scripture together, one child declared that she particularly liked the story of “Jesus sending the grownups away” – her take on Jesus welcoming children (Mark 10:13-16).
of our hearts and bodies into our heads, and it is a bigger leap to joy from there. We need children to remind us that humility is greatness.

The disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. (Matthew 18:1-5)

It is not a complete turning of the tables, but close to it:

“Adults are just obsolete children. To hell with them.” Theodore Geisel (Dr Seuss).

For after all, Jesus uses infant imagery to inspire grown up.

Joyful like heaven

Three stories stood out to me as I worked with evangelists last century.² Their home is Luke 15. A lost sheep, a lost coin and a lost son feature. In the finding of each is the recitative of rejoicing:

Over a sheep, “Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.” (v7)

Over a coin: “Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” (v10)

Over a son who is found, “get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.” (v23) and to the son who had lost grasp of his own childlikeness, “we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.” (v32).

This just three chapters before Luke tells the story of Jesus blessing the children:

People were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them; and when the disciples saw it, they sternly ordered them not to do it. But Jesus called for them and said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” (Luke 18:15-17)

It is a truly amazing thing, this heavenly rejoicing. It is responsive to love and finding, and is expressed, not repressed.

Creation does, in fact, reflect this:

“For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.” (Isaiah 55:12)

Creation and the kingdom of God reflect and resound with the joy of God.

---

² From 1989 to 1993 I was privileged to work with evangelists in training at the (now defunct) Church Army College of Evangelism.
And in this midst, children are affirmed in their rejoicing and in being rejoiced over.

**Joyful like God**

It is useful to note that it is not only the heavenly minions who rejoice, like puppets or clockwork laughing machines. They celebrate because they are in the presence of the God of celebration, the King of joy. The joyful theologian, Karl Barth\(^3\), claims that it is the rejoicing of the faithful that affirms that they truly are the children of God:

> If we are seekers of God, and to that extent lovers of God, this can be definitely and unequivocally proved and maintained of the children of God only by the one thing: that in all circumstances and in every connexion they rejoice if their seeking is not in vain, if therefore the One whom they seek allows Himself to be found by them, if in that way He confirms the fact that He has sought and found them, before they ever sought Him. How can they not rejoice when God really confronts them, when the One whom they loved loves them again and anew, as He had already loved them before, when He is therefore present to them in His Word, in Jesus Christ, when He speaks with them, and acts on them? Is He not a faithful God because He does so? And how can they not rejoice that He is so faithful?\(^4\)

So for Barth, as for St Paul, rejoicing is not simply in what God has done, but in who God is. And as children celebrate at times for no apparent reason, so do the children of God rejoice in the Lord. Always (Philippians 4:4).

Barth goes as far as to say that God’s glory is not truly glory if we omit the recognition that it is joyful.

> God’s glory is the indwelling joy of His divine being which as such shines out from Him, which overflows in its richness, which in its super-abundance is not satisfied with itself but communicates itself. All God’s works must be understood also and decisively from this point of view. All together and without exception they take part in the movement of God’s self-glorification and the communication of His joy....God wills them and loves them because, far from having their existence of themselves and their meaning in themselves, they have their being and existence in the movement of the divine self-glorification, in the transition to them of His immanent joyfulness. It is their destiny to offer a true if inadequate response in the temporal sphere to the jubilation with which the Godhead is filled from eternity to eternity.\(^5\)

If then this truly is the nature of God, it is no surprise to find that it is the nature of God even when in the midst of a broken creation. Jesus, as Emmanuel, the “with us God”, is joyful. Though the Scriptures do not describe Jesus as laughing, though they do as weeping, his zest for life, humour and attractiveness all point to a joyful and attractive human being.

> Inevitably when the perfect divine being declares itself, it also radiates joy in the dignity and power of its divinity, and thus releases the pleasure, desire and enjoyment

---

3 Karl Barth (1886-1968) was a Swiss Reformed theologian and pastor.

4 Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, I.2.392. (Hereafter CD)

5 CD II.1.647-8.
of which we have spoken, and in this way, by means of this form, persuasive and convincing. And this persuasive and convincing form must necessarily be called the beauty of God.  

Barth explores God’s beauty in the incarnation. It is in the work of the Son that the beauty of God is revealed “in a special way and in some sense to a supreme degree”. The supreme degree is the sense that the beauty of God arouses joy. This theme is repeated during the discussion, with considerable force. The beauty of Christ is to be found supremely for humanity in the fact that it is to arouse a response to the saving work of Christ. Here is God’s glory in humility. This allows Barth to undergird his observation that (in Christ and His death) “God’s beauty embraces death as well as life, fear as well as joy, what we might call the ugly as well as what we might call the beautiful.” This is because “the beauty of Jesus…is the beauty of God”. This beauty of God is also the joy of God. It is a revelation of God and a pointer to God. God is joy, just as God is love.

We cannot overlook the fact that God is glorious in such a way that He radiates joy, so that He is all He is with and not without beauty. Otherwise His glory might well be joyless.

**The joyful God and death**

We are used to the gospel as good news through death, and the cross as gift of life as well as means of death.

Barth cannot imagine that the God who gave life and who gave the life of his son could be a God of gloom or a God of deadening demand. This finds its foundation in the whole Easter event: cross and resurrection:

> in and under the No of the cross a powerful Yes is also spoken: “Christ is risen”, and…this powerful Yes may also be received and repeated. This being the case, faith and confession are characterised more by joy and thankfulness than by fearfulness and boldness.

For as the Orthodox liturgy has it

> through the Cross 
> joy has come into all the world.

---

6 CD II.1.659.  
7 CD II.1.661.  
8 CD II.1.665.  
9 CD II.1.665.  
10 CD II.1.655.  
11 CD IV.2.355.  
Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 12:2).

We read this differently when we think of mothers so desperate for their children that they consider harming themselves.

We realise that children, the joy of God, are conscripted as soldiers in brutal wars.

Yet out of this can come life. David Lual, a former South Sudanese child soldier, was ordained as an Anglican deacon in Melbourne on 30 August. Despite the agony of war, killing and memories, he is transformed, and knows what Jesus meant when he said to his disciples “Remain in my love” and “my joy in you, your joy full/complete” (John 15:9-14) and that Jesus’ disciples “may have joy fulfilled in themselves /the full measure of [his] joy in them” (John 17:13).

He, like St Paul, knows what it means to be

sorrowful, yet always rejoicing
poor, yet making many rich
having nothing, and yet possessing everything (2 Corinthians 6:10)

**Lament and Joy**

In recent years I have been active in encouraging students and church communities to explore both joy and lament in their shared lives. Judaism’s strength under persecution can be ascribed, at least in part, to the communal engagement in despair and lament in the annual reading of books such as Lamentations and Ecclesiastes.

The balanced diet of worship needs both lament and joy.

Westermann, noting that both lament and praise are set in the context of the account of the deliverance from Egypt, notes:

In the Old Testament lamentation and praise are juxtaposed to each other: Just as lamentation is the language of suffering, so the praise of God is the language of joy. One is as much a part of man’s being as the other. But it is an illusion to suppose that there could be a relationship with God in which there was only praise and never lamentation. Just as joy and sorrow are a part of the finitude of human existence (Gen 2-3), so praise and lamentation are a part of man’s relationship to God. Hence, something must be amiss if praise of God has a place in Christian worship but lamentation does not. Praise can retain its authenticity and naturalness only in polarity with lamentation.14

---


14 Westermann, “Role of Lament”, p27.
Westermann’s insight is certainly helpful as far as maintaining a balance between the actions of praise and lament in the worshipping community are concerned. And given that these can both be seen as responses to God’s nature — which calls for human beings to “Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep” (Rom 12:15) and so to express love of God and neighbour — they may fairly be juxtaposed to help in our understanding of the nature of each. But there is some danger in deriving these affections from their expressions, given that the nature of the external actions is arguably different for humans and for God.

Yet to be true to our calling as redeemed human beings, and in building resilience in our families and communities, I believe we need to engage even our young members in this shared practice of reality.

I explored the books that our family has for children. Most are fun. Yet our children also chose to read some dark books: John Marsden’s Tomorrow series, Harry Potter, in a way, and so on.

In fact, our library of books on parenting includes a significant number of books on introducing children to death, and helping them to grieve. Perhaps this is our pastoral ministry context, perhaps a dark side to our lives, or perhaps a sense of this important reality for children. Facing death is a time a little too late to come to terms with it, I think.

An illustration that I use is that you are shown opals on a black backdrop, a dark velvet cushion, perhaps. The fire and the wonder are best seen in that context, or as Barbara Johnson puts it, “splashes of joy in the cesspools of life.”

**Doing lament and joy**

So the need for engagement in lament and joy may be established, but how might we practise this?

Some ideas include:

- Incorporating times of lament in liturgies
- Being open about our own grief in our families and churches
- Admitting how hard life can be
- Affirming how wonderful life can be
- Noting that the ability to feel sadness may be as much a mental disorder as the inability to feel joy is for depressives
- Reading Scripture with attention to pathos, not merely logos
- Letting children interpret
  - Scripture
  - Events
  - Observations
  - Feelings

---

15 Book title.
Elders

But not theologians, of course!

Consider: What happens when we read these with the heart, and with feeling:

[Have] joy and peace in believing…overflow with hope in the Holy Spirit (!)
(Romans 15:13)

Rejoice in the Lord! Again. Rejoice! (Philippians 4:4)

What would happen if we did what we were told? To rejoice, when we don’t feel happy, like we learn to love when we don’t feel loving. And to lament when we don’t feel sad? Church might become an emotional gym! We could work out our life muscles!

Karl Barth addresses the command to joy in Philippians by noting Paul’s context, and that of the people.

In considering 1:4 my prayer for you with joy, he says:

Here for the first time the word ‘joy’, so characteristic of this epistle. The context in which it appears should not be overlooked:…Joy from him and in him to whom Paul gives thanks, to whom his intercession is addressed, joy from and in his Self-attestation over all human depths…joy from and in the Mercy which Paul sees reigning like a triumphant monarch in the Philippian congregation. For the rest joy from and in — nothing. Else it would not be the jubilant joy which is undoubtedly to be heard here. It is in fact as keynote that this joy is meant, beyond the joy that one ‘has’, feels, can show…at all times it can and must take place. It would be an empty phrase, were it not…correlated with the Christian hope, with the resurrection of the dead. It is, however, no empty phrase….it can also be expressed as an imperative: to rejoice, to let ourselves be comforted, strengthened and encouraged, is from the Christian point of view a command like any other.

This scriptural engagement is played out in Barth as he explores and expounds the “perfections” – that is the character or nature – of God. And the nature of God is seen by us in the saving action of God.

**Joy as recovery of human identity**

Barth’s analysis of the perfections of God and the place of joy within the perfections must be noted as being placed in intimate association with his discussion of the doctrine of election.¹⁶

---

¹⁶ Or, as Hartwell puts it, his doctrine of election is placed in the midst of his doctrine of God: “With this teaching (of the perfections of God) we have not yet reached the end of Barth’s doctrine of God. To be truly Christian, the latter, in his view, has to include another aspect of the reality of God. That aspect is manifested in the fact, revealed in Jesus Christ, that God stands in a definite relationship ad extra to another. (CD II.2.3f). This relationship is viewed by Barth as belonging to the Person of God as such, that is, to His reality, and therefore to the doctrine of God in the narrower sense of this concept, in as much as it rests upon a distinct attitude of God which, inherent in the very nature of God as the One who loves in freedom, is expressed in His free and gracious decision before the creation of the world and of man to unite Himself in the person of His eternal Son with man in the man Jesus of Nazareth and in Him and through Him with the people represented by Him and, consequently, to determine Himself, that is, to elect Himself to fellowship with man and man to fellowship with Himself, and to do so quite concretely in the person of Jesus Christ.” Herbert Hartwell, *The Theology of Karl Barth: an Introduction*, Duckworth, London, 1964, 104-5. Further, Hartwell, *Theology of Karl Barth*, 105, notes: “…the Christian God is this God or He is not God at all.” It is no exaggeration to say that the heart of
The whole of Volume 2 of the *Church Dogmatics* explores, directly or indirectly, this major theme of God as electing God.\(^{17}\) Thus, from the beginning of his discussion of election and the call of humankind to come to God, the call is to “Enter into the joy of the Lord!”.\(^{18}\) The call is to humanity to enter into the fullness of createdness. Barth uses the image of a child having all the fullness of adult joy and sorrow present in playfulness and the pursuits of childhood.\(^{19}\) The call is issued with certainty and joy, not *sotto voce* and half-grudgingly.\(^{20}\) It does not crush joy in the Lord.\(^{21}\) But it does expose false joy based on humanity’s self interest and fascination with sinfulness.\(^{22}\) The “Readiness of Man” is seen in the Declaration of Barmen which Barth twice describes as “a cry of need and joy”.\(^{23}\) The response evoked in God’s revelation is in participation, which is with gratitude, but *cannot take place without joyfulness*.\(^{24}\) The human dimension of this evocative joy is given a fuller discussion in the context of gladness and gratitude, wherein Barth describes gladness as the fullest expression of humanity. It is not mere thankfulness of gratitude that shape our response to God’s grace and love. That would risk being merely an appropriate transactional response. Rather, gladness indicates a recovery of the wonder of life, and of the delight of being human.\(^{25}\)

Barth declares that the dogmatic task should be a joyful one. “[t]he theologian who has no joy in his work is not a theologian at all”.\(^{26}\) And this theologian affirms the journey of joy and even the pilgrimage of pleasure as part of the life lived well, in mind and heart. But it sits

---

\(^{17}\) In this regard, see also Colin E. Gunton, *Becoming and Being: The Doctrine of God in Charles Hartshorne and Karl Barth*, Oxford Theological Monographs, Oxford, 1978, 187: “The triune God happens as both election and command, and if we neglect these two doctrines, then we neglect to say as much as we might about what God is.” See also Gunton’s “The Doctrine of God: Karl Barth’s Doctrine of Election as Part of his Doctrine of God” (originally in *JTS*, 25, 1974, 381-92), revised edition in *Theology Through the Theologians: Selected Essays 1972-1995*, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1996, 88-104.

\(^{18}\) CD II.1.11.

\(^{19}\) CD II.1.53.

\(^{20}\) CD II.1.113.

\(^{21}\) CD II.1.114-5.

\(^{22}\) CD II.1.166-7.

\(^{23}\) CD II.1.176.

\(^{24}\) CD II.1.219. (KD 247).

\(^{25}\) CD I.2.393: “Grace demands of them (sc. Christians) that they trust only in grace, and live only by grace—and by grace really live. If that be God, the Son of God and the Word of God, who can rejoice at it? Who in seeking after God ever sought after that? We can only reply that the children of God rejoice in it. This and this alone is what the children of God have sought. Therefore the children of God are not disillusioned or embittered. They do not turn away, they do not return to that pretended love at a distance, when the Beloved One is seen to be like this, and meets them in this way. For the children of God there is nothing bitter about the severity of the Law from which there is no escape”.

\(^{26}\) CD II.1.656.
best against the backdrop of the journey of justice and the pilgrimage of pain. Mortality is double sided.

A few weeks ago, Ehtha You Too Noe shared her story of growing up in faith as a Karen refugee in a camp on the Thai Burma border. Little was provided for the refugees, and her father had to work outside the camp to try to make income to support himself, his wife, Ehtha, and their other children. She spoke of praying that he would get home. If the authorities found him working, he would be imprisoned.

Her family have just welcomed a new family, with the twelve in total sharing a small three bedroom house for a month. It is easy if you remember that you were once homeless. Easy if you remember that the camps had so much less. Easy, if you know that you yourself are a pilgrim. If you remember that you are one who is seeking an eternal hope. That you can glimpse it, though must remain on pilgrimage to reach it.

As the writer to the Hebrews has it of Abraham and his fellow pilgrims:

If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them (Hebrew 11:15-16).

I’m proud that it is St Paul’s Cathedral which displays a seven meter banner:

LET’S FULLY WELCOME REFUGEES

We make an error if we only see the joy around at the time of Jesus’ birth.

For in many respects, Jesus was just another child in disadvantage. A refugee.

We read of hundreds being killed at the time of this birth, but one little life made a big difference to all of life. The joy and wonder of his birth had a terrible backdrop of oppression, fear, injustice and death.

Subsequent events make that birth just a bit more significant. The context pushes us to take it seriously – in its joy and its lament, its delight and its despair.

The birth story of Jesus only makes sense in the light of what comes after.

The visit of the angel only made sense later on, when it became clear that Jesus was the promised saviour. A child in the midst can see it. Can recognise the wonder.