

“Sacred Delight” – based on John 16:16-24

One of the highlights of Irish life is the annual occurrence of St. Patrick’s Day, with its celebrations, parades and parties. It is every bit as important to the Irishman as Hogmanay is to the Scot, or Mardi Gras to the Brazilian.

But that great celebration of excess and laughter, falls slap-bang in the middle of Lent, a time for denial and quiet reflection of the events which led up to the death of our Saviour – certainly not a time to party, nor a time for joy! But, do the Irish know something about Lent that we do not?

This morning we are going to peek into the lives of a few individuals to get their perspective on what I call “sacred delight”.

She had every reason to be bitter, for although talented, she went unrecognized for years. Prestigious opera circles closed ranks, rejecting her repeatedly for parts, and even critics ignored her compelling voice. It was only after she sang in Europe and won the hearts of the tough-to-please audiences there, that North American opinion leaders acknowledged her talent.

Not only had her professional life been a battle, but, as the mother of two handicapped children, her personal life had also been marked by challenge. Once she had become famous, she purchased a home in Martha’s Vineyard in order to escape the pace of New York City life. Two days before she was due to move in, it burned to the ground. Professional rejection, personal setbacks – perfect soil for the seeds of bitterness, a receptive field for the roots of resentment, but with **her**, anger found no home.

This was the late Beverly Sills, internationally acclaimed opera singer, retired director of the New York City opera. Her friends called her ‘Bubbles’ because her phrases were always sugared with laughter. When Mike Wallace interviewed her, she said, “Years ago I had little or no choice about success, circumstances or even happiness, but I KNEW I could choose to be cheerful.”

Now let’s turn to Glynis Johnson. She spoke slowly, partly because of her convictions, and partly due to her illness. Along with her husband, Don, and their minister, she met to plan her funeral, and once all the details had been finalized, Glynis said,

"We have prayed for healing. God has not given it, but He has blessed us. He has given us strength we did not know we had, and He gave it when we needed it, and not before." Her words were slurred, but clear. Her eyes were moist, but confident.

When Glynis was diagnosed just one year earlier with Lou Gerig's disease, she knew the gradual deterioration of muscle strength and mobility could be used as a stumbling block or a stepping stone. She said, "God wants us to trust in the good times and the bad, for if we don't trust when times are tough, we don't trust at all."

The late Robert Reed said he had everything he needed for joy, but the casual onlooker would not believe so. His hands were twisted and his feet were useless. He could not brush his teeth, comb his hair, or put on his own underwear. His shirts were held together with Velcro and his speech dragged like an old, worn-out, audio cassette.

Robert had cerebral palsy, a disease which prevented him from driving a car, riding a bicycle or going for a walk. But it didn't prevent him from graduating from high school or attending university, graduating with a degree in Latin. Nor did it prevent him from teaching in a college or going to the mission fields of Portugal five times. He eventually moved to Lisbon and within six years had brought seventy people to the Lord – one became his wife.

Later he had a speaking engagement in Toronto. The congregation watched as men of the church carried his wheelchair onto the stage. They watched as a Bible was laid on his lap and they watched as his stiff fingers forced open the pages.

All around the auditorium, people wiped away tears of admiration from their faces. Instead of accepting sympathy or pity, he held his bent hands up in the air and boasted, "I have everything I need for joy." His shirt was held together by Velcro, but his life was held together by joy! //

No man had more reason to be miserable than our final individual. His first home was a palace, where he was known and loved. He had power and was respected, and then he had nothing!

Students still ponder over it and historians stumble to try to explain it. How could a king lose everything in an instant? One moment he was royalty, and the next he was in poverty.

His bed was usually the hard ground, and on a good day, a pallet. He never owned even the most basic form of transportation, and depended upon hand-outs for his income. He was sometimes so hungry that he would eat raw grain, or pick fruit from a tree.

He knew what it was like to be rained on and to be cold. He truly knew what it felt like to be homeless.

His palace grounds had been spotless – now he was exposed to filth. He had never known disease, but now he was exposed to all manner of illnesses.

He had been revered in his kingdom, but now he was ridiculed. His neighbours tried to lynch him & some called him a lunatic. Those who didn't ridicule him tried to use him – they wanted favours or tricks. He was a novelty and they wanted to be seen with him – that is, until being with him was out-of-fashion. Then they wanted to kill him!

He left as he came – poor and penniless. He was buried in a borrowed grave, his funeral financed by compassionate friends. Though he once had everything, he died with nothing! He should have been miserable and bitter, but instead he was joyful...sour-pusses don't attract a following and people followed him wherever he went. Children avoid soreheads, but kids scampered after this man.

Crowds don't gather to hear a woeful message. Crowds clamored to hear this man. Why?... He was joyful...joyful when he was poor, when he was abandoned, when he was betrayed and even when he was hung on a tool of torture with his hands pierced by Roman spikes.

Jesus embodied a stubborn joy, a joy that refused to bend in the wind of hard times. This joy held its ground against pain, a joy whose roots extended deep into the bedrock of eternity.

Perhaps that's where Beverly Sills learned it. Without doubt, that's where Glynis Johnson & Robert Reed learned it...and this is where we can learn it.

What type of joy is this cheerfulness that dares to wink at adversity? This is sacred delight. It is sacred because only God can grant it, so it cannot be stolen. It is delight because it has the element of both satisfaction and surprise. //

Delight is the Bethlehem shepherds dancing a jig outside a cave. Delight is Mary watching God sleep in a rough feeding trough. Delight is Joseph teaching the creator of the world how to hold a hammer. Delight is the look on Andrew's face at the lunch pail that never came up empty. Delight is a leper seeing a finger where once there had been a nub. Delight is a father scrubbing the pig smell from his prodigal son's back. Delight is the shepherd throwing a party because one sheep was found.

Delight is Jesus doing impossible things in crazy ways – healing the blind with spit, paying taxes with coins found in a fish's mouth, and coming back to life, disguised as a gardener.

Sacred delight is good news coming through the back door of your heart. It's what you'd always dreamed of, but never expected. It's the too-good-to-be-true, actually coming true. It's having God as your pinch-hitter, your lawyer, your dad, your biggest fan and your best friend. God is at your side, in your heart, out in front and protecting your back.

It's hope when you least expect it...a flower on the sidewalk of life.

In times of stress and trouble, Satan tries to play tricks with our minds, so let's not give him that opportunity.

Let's focus on positive re-enforcement in our interactions and conversations, and let's budget for some quiet, "thinking" time each day.

Friends, *pray* for joy. Try talking to God in a conversational manner. You don't have to use big words with Him. You will never succeed in impressing the Holy of Holies.

Final bit of Sunday advice...make room in your life for humour. It is part of God's personality package for each of us.

There is delicious gladness that comes from God – a holy joy – a sacred delight.

And this is within our reach. We are one decision from joy.
AMEN