

Deep within each of us lurk questions of identity and belonging. Who am I? Who do I belong to? Who loves me? If we can't answer these questions, or if we belong to people who are untrustworthy, or unsafe, then our lives are a real struggle. Research shows that you can meet a child's basic needs for food, clothing and shelter, but without human interaction, without someone smiling and playing with them, and giving them a sense of love and belonging, a child will not thrive – their brains don't develop, and they can't form relationships.

Most of us haven't had that extreme level of emotional neglect, but, living in this broken world, all of us struggle to be confident about who we are, and where we belong. Most of us have received only limited and conditional love from others. That is, we've learned that we are loved and welcome only if we live up to some standard. Even Santa Claus is part of the eternal surveillance system that rewards those who are nice and withholds from those who are naughty.

This all plays out as adults in the way we behave to others, especially in groups. When we're not 100% sure of our welcome, when we're not sure if we can trust other people to love and care for us, we behave in various ways to get what we want and feel safe. Some of us perform and achieve – believing that we'll be welcome if we're good at stuff. Others disappear into the background, believing that we'll be welcome if we're not noticed. Others try to help and care for everyone, believing that we'll be welcome if people need us. Some even dominate or manipulate or lie – believing that we will only belong when we hold power over others.

Our Christian faith has the potential to free us from this whole drama. Our faith affirms that the One who created us is also the One who rejoices over us, and loves us without conditions. In God, there is ultimate belonging, ultimate love. In Jesus, we see what it looks like when a person lives their whole life in the deep awareness that they come from God and belong to God. The way Jesus lived and cared for others overflowed out of the complete trust that he had in God.

The great challenge for us, once we step into the Christian life, is to live each day from the place inside us where we know that we belong to God, and that God not only provides the necessities of life, but that God rejoices in us. That God looks at us and goes ‘look! there’s my beloved – isn’t she awesome? Isn’t he magnificent?’

Henri Nouwen describes how difficult it is to live consistently from this place: “Many of my daily preoccupations suggest that I belong more to the world than to God. A little criticism makes me angry, and a little rejection makes me depressed. A little praise raises my spirits, and a little success excites me. It takes very little to raise me up or thrust me down... My life is mostly a struggle for survival: not a holy struggle, but an anxious struggle resulting from the mistaken idea that it is the world that defines me... The great conversion called for by Jesus is to move from belonging to the world to belonging to God.”

The hope held out to us in this ‘great conversion’ is that we will learn to experience joy. Real joy. Many of us don’t know what it is to feel joy, because we’re too attached to what makes us happy and sad – that is, we’re focused on the stuff that’s happening to us, and whether we like it or not. Is my friend being nice to me? Are my family coming for Christmas? Is my boss at work demanding and unkind? Am I tired, or unwell or feeling fit and healthy? Did I get a pay rise or a bonus?

Joy is different, because it’s not based in our circumstances. It’s not about whether things are working out well for me or not. It is possible to touch into an underlying joy even when undergoing suffering, or when feeling sad, or disappointed. It may only come in glimpses – small fairy-light twinkles in the darkness. But for someone who has learned to belong to God, and who knows deep down that God always holds them in love, the joy is there, waiting. That’s how St Paul – who had his fair share of suffering and trial – can offer the startling advice: “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances.”

This joy, I believe, also sits at the heart of how John the Baptist was able to live as a signpost, a fore-runner. Most of us want to be 'the guy.' We want people to know who 'we' are – what's important about us. The allure of fame is the idea that everyone will know 'who I am' and 'remember my name' as the old song goes. Part of the appeal of stories like Harry Potter, or the Matrix movies, is that any of us might wake up one day and realise that we have a special destiny, that we're 'the one.' But when the messengers of the Pharisees come to John asking 'are you Elijah? Or the prophet? Tell us who you are!' John is able simply to say: 'I'm the voice, preparing the way for another.' How many of us are that free in relation to other people's expectations? We want people to think well of us, to approve of us, to reward us for the good that we do, and to see and recognise us.

The trouble is, we can't control how other people think of us, despite all our best efforts. And this taps into the insecurity that I began by talking about – insecurity around love and belonging, and all the ways that we attempt to influence and persuade other people to provide us with the approval we need.

The only way to live into our calling as people who point to the love of God, is to look to God for our identity, and for our sense of belonging and welcome in the world. The truth is, we are all, already, wonderful in God's eyes, and need only come to God in prayer to receive from God what the world cannot give. The source of our joy is the joy that God has in us. In that joy, we can be secure, even when life is very insecure and uncertain. In that joy, we know that all will be well, even when things aren't going very well at all.

But we need to receive this truth inside ourselves every day. It's not something we come to just once, and from then on it's all sunshine and roses. We are creatures of forgetting, and one of the things we seem to find it fastest and easiest to forget is that we are loved. That's why, for Paul, rejoicing and praying go together. It's in prayer, in the daily receiving of our selves from God, and in the lifting up of our needs to God, that we are recalled to our true home. This is a tank that we need to fill up even when life is good – perhaps especially when life is good, lest we forget that happiness and pleasure are not the same as joy.

So rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. And for us all. Amen.