

I want to share with you today my experience of the joy of faith, especially as it belongs to a priest.

I didn't become a priest because of morality, or because of the influence one can acquire within the Church, or because I like dressing up at least once a day. I became a priest because I wanted to be allowed to give people good news. I like to be the man who runs in front of the cameras in a crisis, shouting "It's OK! The news is good!" I like to be the person who rings up anxious relatives and says: "They're safe! They're out of danger!"

There are lots of ways of life where you can hope to do this: all the helping professions hope for it. If you're a policeman, you want to solve people's anxieties and ward off what threatens them. If you're a good surgeon, it must be enormously gratifying to tell patients or their families that you solved the problem, that everything went well.

If you're really ambitious, and want to tackle even huger problems, you can become a psychiatrist, and tread the dark pathways of disturbed minds. Success is much less sure there. For a priest, the challenge is deeper yet: he has to confront the demons who use death and despair as their very real weapons. He has to help people who have lost faith in themselves, in their loved ones, in the future, in life itself.

These odds seem insuperable, and would be, if there were no God, no salvation in Christ, no Gospel.

The joy of the priest's situation is that there is God, that salvation is already the fact about life, and we can be charged with the task of telling people the Gospel.

This doesn't mean that life for an evangelist is easy. Before people listen to your good news, they make sure you get the full benefit of their bad news. That makes the ministry of the Gospel entirely real. You can only do it if you're prepared to enter the depths of darkness, where the people who most need you are holed up. It's a help if you've been there yourself, and can offer heartfelt sympathy from personal experience.

But if those barriers can be thrown down, and you can help people out of their slavery, to come and inherit the light, it will be because God has been with you, and you have been privileged to see his grace at work. I don't think there is any happiness greater than this; we aren't talking about some temporary remission in the gloom, or a bit of transient good luck. Those who have been able to lay a hand on salvation are blessed for life, and I mean eternal life; their knowledge of the power of God will change all future experience, even the worst of it; and what lies behind us can also be changed, resolved, forgiven, and healed.

*This honour is for all his faithful.* All faithful Christians can act as heralds of the Gospel. But a priest is more likely to get an opportunity to do this than anyone; people ask him to do it several times a day, and I'm doing it now, very predictably, on Sunday morning! In my work in the Hospital I don't have to struggle to get to first base, and I can say things to people which even their dearest relative or friend might hesitate to say. In the confessional, I am intimate with people beyond the imagination of ignorant outsiders; people tell me things there which are told to no-one else, and sometimes I am permitted to speak to people about areas they cannot share with anyone else. I am invited to share the deepest moments of happiness and sorrow. I think I know what it means to see Satan fall like lightning from heaven. This is a life which I wouldn't change for any other.