

Heartfelt Religion

On the order of fact, faith and feeling

Introduction

Wednesday was a sad day in Australia as beloved Catholic priest, social justice campaigner, and media personality Father Bob Maguire died aged 88.¹

Father Bob's charity work, advocacy for the poor, and wicked sense of humour made him a popular figure in Melbourne and across Australia.

Father Bob was ordained in Melbourne at the age of 25 and was a chaplain for conscripted Australian soldiers heading to Vietnam for several years. He then became parish priest of Sts. Peter & Paul's Catholic Church in South Melbourne until 2012, when he was forced to retire because, in his own words, he accused Cardinal George Pell of punishing him for being "open to all". Maguire described his exit as a "dishonourable discharge".

Despite his grumpiness, realistically, Father Bob was forced to retire because he was 77 years young and deserved to at least slow down—not that anyone could stop him!

Father Bob was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia in 1989 for service to homeless youth. In 2011, he was named Victorian of the Year.

Father Bob came to my attention in 2004 when he appeared with broadcaster John Safran on SBS's *John Safran vs God*. The duo continued hosting radio programs on ABC's Triple J for a decade.

Whether you loved him or disliked him, agreed with him or disagreed, he was a person who represented a vibrant and active and attractive faith to Australians, and therefore deserves to be honoured among Christians.

Even more close to home, however, was the passing of Flo Anderson yesterday. Aged 100 years and 5 months, the mother of Roy and Heather lived a life of faith and witness, and will be fondly remembered by the 66 members of her extended family. Our prayers and support are with you both at this time.

Easter Is a Season

Now to the topic at hand: You may have thought we celebrated Easter two Sundays ago, that it is all now 'done and dusted'. In fact, the Church celebrates Easter for fifty days!

During this season, we remember the resurrection appearances of Christ Jesus, we celebrate his ascension into heaven, and the coming of the Spirit on Pentecost.

Our solemn preparation of Lent and somber meditation of Holy Week gives way to victorious festivity during the fifty days of Easter. Easter is a season of celebration, for Christ is risen! *He is risen, indeed!*

On the Road to Emmaus

As a consequence, last week we reflected on Jesus' appearance to the disciples gathered together at the close of the day of his resurrection (Jn 20:19–23).² We then considered his appearance, a week later, to Thomas (Jn 20:24–29).

The next appearance we will consider today also occurred on that Sunday, when Jesus appeared to two disciples who were making their way to a Judean village called Emmaus (Lk 24:13–35).

Here is a photo of a village named after the ancient Emmaus, whose modern location is uncertain. The Gospel writer Luke reported the village was 11 kilometers from Jerusalem, but he did not specify in which direction.

I described last week how we should pay attention when fine details are provided and here is a case in point, since only one of the disciples is named: Cleopas. We are not provided the name of the other disciple. Cleopas obviously remained a friend of Jesus with some significance to the early Church, but we can only speculate about what happened to the other disciple.

These two disciples were likely among those who fled when Jesus was arrested, yet they must have remained in Jerusalem for Luke reported they “returned to Jerusalem” after their encounter with Jesus, a reference from which we can infer the two started their journey from that city.

After this, he appeared in a different form to two of them walking on their way into the country. And they went and reported it to the rest, who did not believe them either. (Mark 16:12–13)

It may be the case these two disciples were among the group to whom the women reported seeing Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Given what we know of the culture of the time, it is no surprise the women's report was taken as nonsense and the disciples did not believe them (Lk 24:10–11).

Could it be these two threw up their hands, then gave up and left for Emmaus? If so, this would be interesting because, according to the Gospel writer Mark, when these two returned to Jerusalem themselves, to report their encounter with Jesus, the other disciples did not believe them either (Mk 16:12–13).

Now that same day two of them were on their way to a village called Emmaus ... while they were discussing and arguing, Jesus himself came near and began to walk along with them. (Luke 24:13–15)

Speculations aside, as these two disciples were walking toward Emmaus (Lk 24:13–35), they were talking about all that happened and argued over the significance of those events.

As the story goes, Jesus appeared and joined them on their journey, but they did not recognise him—which is not entirely surprising, given the situation.

Then he asked them, “What is this dispute that you're having with each other as you are walking?” And they stopped walking and looked discouraged. (Luke 24:17)

Jesus asked them why they were arguing. The report of the scene states, “they stopped walking and looked discouraged”.

I am intrigued by this. They were arguing, but then became discouraged when asked why. Were they discouraged because they realised their arguing had impacted a fellow traveller? If this fellow traveller did indeed not know what had happened in Jerusalem, then they would now have to relive what happened as they explained it all to him. Their pain would have been magnified further.

He said to them, “How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! ... Then beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted for them the things concerning himself in all the Scriptures. (Luke 24:25–27)

Funnily, rather than the fellow traveller too becoming discouraged, Jesus instead chastised them for not understanding their scriptures! This stranger-who-was-not-actually-a-stranger then shared the good news with them, as they should have been with him!

These two disciples then invited Jesus to stay the night with them, for it was getting late, and as they shared a meal, their “eyes were opened, and they recognised him”, at which point Jesus disappeared from their sight.

They said to each other, “Weren’t our hearts burning within us while he was talking with us on the road and explaining the Scriptures to us?” (Luke 24:32)

In Christian faith and practice, three things are essential: *Fact*, *Faith*, and *Feeling*. These three things come in this order.

Prior to this encounter, these two disciples had the facts about Jesus, for they had walked and talked with him long before these events. They only continued to be his disciples because they had placed their faith in him.

Why then did they lose their faith so quickly upon Jesus’ crucifixion, which he had himself prophesied three times before it actually happened?

These disciples lost their faith and forgot the facts because their hearts had not yet burned within them, they had not the feelings required to secure one’s Christian faith and practice.

This story reminds us Christianity is *a heartfelt religion*, but we do well to remember the feelings, the “burning heart”, always properly follows faith in Christ.

The apostle Paul understood this when he wrote,

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace... (Galatians 5:22a)

These feelings come after faith and fact, and if these three are out of order—for instance, if one is led to faith by their feelings, before even appreciating the facts—this is not likely to last.

Let us look more closely at the facts of these feelings, that our faith be bolstered and we better endure our own experiences of disappointment and disaster, confusion and chaos.³

Peace Is Heartfelt

In the Bible, the “heart” is often used as a symbol for the source of our feelings, the emotional aspect of our personality. With this in mind, we say that Christianity is a *heartfelt* religion.

Of the feelings of Christianity, *peace is heartfelt*.

Peace with God

In the Bible, peace is not a synonym for quiet; it is a synonym for harmony and flourishing, a state we all crave.

We enter this world and learn too quickly not all is right. Yet, despite our circumstances, we find peace when we are in right relationships. And the most important relationship of all is to be right with God, our creator.

The friends of Jesus experience peace with God, for as it is written,

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. (Romans 5:1)

The fact of Jesus’ life and ministry draws us to place our faith in him, by which we are “justified”, which is to be accepted by God as not guilty and our sin is no longer counted against us. Knowing this fact, we experience peace in our heart for we have peace with God.

The one who remains fallen in sin has no peace for they are looking for this state of harmony where it cannot be found. The result is,

The wicked are like the storm-tossed sea, for it cannot be still, and its water churns up mire and muck. There is no peace for the wicked,” says my God. (Isaiah 57:20–21; cf. Romans 3:10)

Those who are right with God have peace in whatever circumstances we face because our identity is made clear and our place in this world certain by our relationship with our Creator, which matters more than anything.⁴

Peace from God

Why do we not experience peace elsewhere? This is because *peace is a gift from God*, as it is written,

Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Don’t let your heart be troubled or fearful. (John 14:27; cf. Romans 1:7; 15:33)

Just because we appreciate the facts of Jesus’ life and ministry, and place our faith in him, does not mean the feelings are generated necessarily. The experience of peace is a gift we lay hold of, peace is from God.

Peace of God

What is this experience of peace?

Don’t worry about anything, but in everything, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. (Philippians 4:6)

Achieving such a state of harmony where we need not worry about anything is worth its weight in gold!

This is a peace that is perfect:

You will keep the mind that is dependent on you in perfect peace, for it is trusting in you. (Isaiah 26:3)

This is a great peace:

Those who love Your law have great peace, And nothing causes them to stumble. (Psalm 119:165 NASB95)⁵

It is an abundant peace:

May the righteous flourish in his days and well-being abound until the moon is no more. (Psalm 72:7)

This is a peace which, yes, is incomprehensible to us sinners who have never known such, yet it is a peace which abides:

Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Don't let your heart be troubled or fearful. (John 14:27)

The friends of Jesus know the facts of his life and ministry, so have placed their faith in him. As a result, their Christian lifestyle is characterised by the feeling of peace.

Joy Is Heartfelt

Of the feelings of Christianity, *joy is heartfelt*,

For you know that you were redeemed from your empty way of life inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ... (1 Peter 1:18–19a)

Joy is a quality or attitude of delight and happiness, which is grounded in the work of the triune God. It is a feeling experienced naturally in many circumstances of life and in human relationships, but especially by the friends of Jesus, who experience joy in response to all God has done for us.

The Joy of Sins Forgiven

We experience a feeling of joy when we finally and fully comprehend our sins are forgiven, as it is written,

How joyful is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered! (Psalm 32:1)

An example of this particular experience is seen in the story of the Ethiopian eunuch, who was baptised on the side of a road by the disciple Philip:

When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him any longer but went on his way rejoicing. (Acts 8:39)

The Joy of Communion with God

The friends of Jesus experience a feeling of joy when we practice communion with God through our spiritual disciplines, as it is written,

You reveal the path of life to me; in your presence is abundant joy; at your right hand are eternal pleasures. (Psalm 16:11)

We experience joy in our communion with each other, as it is written,

what we have seen and heard we also declare to you, so that you may also have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. (1 John 1:3–4)

The Joy of Bible Study

A feeling of joy is also experienced when we study the Bible, whether on our own or in a Connect group. The prophet Jeremiah described it this way:

Your words were found, and I ate them. Your words became a delight to me and the joy of my heart, for I bear your name, LORD God of Armies. (Jeremiah 15:16)

The Joy of Christian Worship

Joy is found when we worship together the Lord our God:

Come, let's shout joyfully to the LORD, shout triumphantly to the rock of our salvation! Let's enter his presence with thanksgiving; let's shout triumphantly to him in song. (Psalm 95:1–2)

Another psalmist described it this way:

I rejoiced with those who said to me, "Let's go to the house of the LORD." (Psalm 122:1)

The Joy of Christian Service

We also experience a feeling of joy when we serve others in Jesus' name, as it is written,

Serve the LORD with gladness; come before him with joyful songs. (Psalm 100:2)

We serve through our work and chosen professions. While this may seem like a drudgery at times, performed in the correct attitude of serving the Lord will transform our experience, as it is written,

Those who sow in tears will reap with shouts of joy. Though one goes along weeping, carrying the bag of seed, he will surely come back with shouts of joy, carrying his sheaves. (Psalm 126:5–6)

The friends of Jesus know the facts of his life and ministry, so have placed their faith in him. As a result, their Christian lifestyle is characterised by the feeling of joy.

Love Is Heartfelt

Of the feelings of Christianity, *love is heartfelt*. While our popular culture would have us believe “all you need is love”, it does not come to us as naturally as we think, nor do we understand what it is as completely as we believe.

The apostle Paul described the ultimate act and attitude of love this way:

For rarely will someone die for a just person—though for a good person perhaps someone might even dare to die. (Romans 5:7)

Love is a caring commitment, in which affection and delight are shown to others. The most unselfish commitment would be to die for another person in need, yet we are not so ready to do so, due to our propensity to judge others.

We are not capable of loving others, whether they are just or good. We are only able to love at all because we ourselves have been loved,

Love for God

as it is written,

We love because he first loved us. (1 John 4:19)

This fact is true because without God’s love we would not truly know what it is to love. Recognising how our Creator’s affection and delight for us resulted in his caring commitment to our reconciliation, our own affection and delight is ignited in response.

Love is grounded, therefore, in the nature of God himself, in his words and actions. God has, and continues to, demonstrate the nature of love and defines the direction in which human love should develop, as it is written,

Jesus answered, “The most important [commandment] is Listen, Israel! The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. (Mark 12:29–30)

The friends of Jesus know the fact of God’s love for us, so feel love for God.

Love for the Brethren

Because we feel God’s love for us, we love him, which is our salvation. We know our salvation and the feeling of love rightly because we love each other, as it is written,

We know that we have passed from death to life because we love our brothers and sisters. The one who does not love remains in death. (1 John 3:14)

We can serve each other out of duty, but when that service becomes a caring commitment, overflowing with affection and delight in each other, we know we have been transformed into loving our brothers and sisters-in-faith.

Love for Lost Souls

And finally, the love of the friends of Jesus overflows in a love for lost souls, following the example of the apostle Paul, who wrote,

Brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer to God concerning them is for their salvation. (Romans 10:1)

The friends of Jesus know the facts of his life and ministry, so have placed their faith in him. As a result, their Christian lifestyle is characterised by the feeling of love for God, for the brethren and for the lost souls round about.

Conclusion

“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace...” (Gal 5:22a). Every Christian can and should feel these in his heart. And when you do you will exude a vibrant and active and attractive faith, a faith that deserves to be honoured, for it will bless our neighbours and even the nations.

But there will come times when we do not feel in these ways. Peace may be destroyed by the cares of this world. Joy may be lost because of sin. Love may grow cold. At such times, we are prone to doubt and, in the most extreme cases, lose our faith. At such times, we must remember —nay, cling to— the fact our right relationship does not depend upon feeling but on faith.

Knowing the facts of Jesus' life and ministry compels us to place our faith in him and begin to live a Christian lifestyle, which then, even if only fleetingly, experiences the feelings of love, joy and peace.

If you start with the feelings, you may become discouraged when you experience disappointment and disaster, confusion and chaos in life, and then seek love, joy and peace elsewhere, in those things that do not satisfy, which is the plight of the fallen human condition.

You will never find faith in the facts of Jesus' life and ministry if you start with the feelings, because starting there turns love, joy and peace into the ends, rather than the means of faith.

In Christian faith and practice, Fact, Faith, and Feeling are essential, and properly in this order.

The facts of Jesus' life and ministry have drawn us to this place and this community, that we might believe and understand. May our faith be bolstered, so we may endure our experiences of disappointment and disaster, confusion and chaos until the feelings return.

Let the feelings of peace, joy and love overflow even now as we worship the Lord our God together...

Endnotes

- 1 Lachlan Abbott, “Father Bob Maguire dies aged 88”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19-Apr-2023, <https://replug.link/57c92a70> (accessed 19-Apr-2023).
- 2 Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations are taken from *The Christian Standard Bible* (Nashville, TN, USA: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017).
- 3 Based on a sermon outline provided by Luther Nelson, “Heartfelt Religion”, *Golden Nuggets* 32, Nolan Jackson, ed. (2010).
- 4 See Romans 5:1; Isaiah 53:5; Eph. 2:14.
- 5 *New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update* (La Habra, CA, USA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995).

