

Thought for the week: Expressing indescribable joy

In 1 Peter 1:8 we hear the term 'indescribable and glorious joy'. How can we describe 'indescribable joy' if it is not possible to describe it?! Here is a suggestion for the type of joy we are talking about. A group of Bible translators were translating the Bible into the language of the Inuit people in the Arctic. They were translating John 20:20 (where the disciples were overjoyed at seeing Jesus) and were struggling to find a word for overjoyed or rejoiced. It was feeding time for the huskies and one of the translators noticed how overjoyed the dogs were when they were given their meat. So, one of the translators asked an Inuit person to describe the dogs at that point. The translator noted what they said and had a go at translating John 20:20. The Inuit all laughed when he announced 'Then the disciples all wagged their tails when they saw the Lord'. What better way to show joy than enthusiastic tail wagging! This is an image we can relate to.

The joy Peter tries to describe in the letter is all the more remarkable when we understand it is joy ascribed to a collection of churches spread out in exile. Their exile might be better understood as being 'resident aliens', living in persecution, at odds with the dominant culture. Peter stated clearly that the churches he was writing to knew Jesus and this was a result of their faith: 'Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls' (vv.8-9). Though they were suffering, their trust in Christ was giving them hope and joy.

Is our situation similar? Living a life centred around Jesus, we could, and perhaps should, be at odds with the dominant culture that very often is the opposite of life-giving. This passage gives us encouragement that we can know God, even, or especially, in challenging times. Peter was an apostle who knew Jesus first-hand, but the churches he wrote to had not known Jesus. But their joy was through their faith in an invisible, but tangible God. There is a feeling that hope is in short supply in our era, with inequality, war, and impending climate catastrophe hanging over us. Can we, like the churches Peter writes to, see beyond the earthly and celebrate our faith, our knowing Jesus, with joy so great it is akin to tail-wagging huskies at feeding time?