

Sermon for the Launch of Joyful Followers of Jesus

Christ the King 2026

Matthew 25, 31-end

It's a big day today for the Diocese of Blackburn as we launch our new Diocesan Vision in the parishes and congregations of the Diocese. The title of our new Vision is clear and simple and bold. We are going to be **Joyful Followers of Jesus**.

I wonder where you go when you need some joy? Some people turn on the telly and find a comedy show or some escapist reality TV. Some people go and visit family members. Some people get outside to climb mountains or tend their gardens. Some people go out for a night with friends. Some people hop on a plane to Ibiza or jump on a cruise ship.

These things are great and can bring people a lot of fun. But there is a big difference between fun and joy. And the downside of all those activities I have just named is that they are fragile. They don't last all that long, and when they are over, all we have left is fading memories.

Today our Churches are keeping the feast of Christ the King, the last day of the Church year before we kick it all off again next week with Advent Sunday. And this Feast shows us a totally different kind of joy - a joy that is more than fun and more than just an emotion. This joy is a gift – a free gift – and one that can never be taken from us.

In the parable of the sheep and the goats which is being read in most churches today, Jesus is shown at the end of time, seated on a throne of glory, judging the people. And from that seat of judgement, he grants to the sheep the gift of everlasting joy. 'Come you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom that was prepared for you from the foundation of the world.'

Well, they are astonished! They're amazed. "Us?" they say. "Why us?" What have we done to deserve this? The answer is not that they have earned the kingdom. The kingdom is a gift. Rather their lives reveal that they belong to the King.

They have learnt to recognise Jesus where others never think to look—in the hungry, the lonely, the prisoner, the stranger. And because they have seen him there, they have served him there.

And where did they learn to see Jesus like that? They learnt it by first looking at the cross. Most people look at Calvary and see only failure. Christians look at Calvary and see the place where joy is born. Through the suffering of Christ, sin and death are defeated, and the door of a new life is opened. Once we have learnt to see Jesus in the pain of the cross, we begin to see him in the pain of the world. And as we see him there, so we too receive the promise of joy. ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father.’

So it’s very simple. If you want to find joy, get to know King Jesus. If you want to live a life of joy, serve him in his people and especially those who suffer and those for whom life is hard. It’s in following Jesus that we find a joy that is more than skin-deep. This is a joy that flows from the cross. Its source is the saving work of Jesus Christ. Nothing can take it away, and our whole lives are lived in response to it.

We live in a world where for many joy is a rare commodity, where so many people live with anxiety and stress. Maybe they can’t make ends meet. Maybe they are worried about climate breakdown or the state of the world. Maybe their health is poor or they are worried about their families. Maybe they are victims of division or prejudice.

The world needs joy bringers. The world needs people who share a joy that is more than shallow fun, joy that is rooted in something real and permanent, the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That’s why our new vision commits us to being a people of joy – a joy that springs from our following of Jesus.

There are going to be five strands to this new vision. Let me tell you why they all matter so much.

We begin with **knowing Jesus**. As we get to know Jesus better through prayer and worship, through the study of the scripture and through sharing in the Eucharist, so we grow as disciples, and to grow as a disciple is to learn the art of joy. We can only share joy if we know that joy in our own hearts.

Next comes **sharing our faith**. If we know the joy that flows from the cross of Jesus Christ, it stands to reason that we will want others to know that joy too. Keeping it to ourselves is not an option. That means being equipped to share our faith with others and continuing to start new congregations that reach different groups of people.

But joy is never private which is why the next strand is **loving our neighbour**. A people of joy must take practical action to address those things that are enemies of joy – hunger, poverty, hatred, climate breakdown and whatever issues in your own community strip life of its joy. This strand commits us to seeing Jesus in all people, especially those who suffer.

Of course, no vision for the future can ignore the younger generation. So our fourth strand is **inspiring young people**. In a difficult world we want every person growing up in our county to know where lasting joy can be found. And not only do we want to inspire young people with the Gospel, we want them to inspire us because we know how naturally children can share the gift of joy.

And of course, all this relies on the leaders whom God is calling now, so the final strand is **forming Christlike leaders**. God is raising up priests, deacons and lay people who can lead his people in sharing the Gospel of joy. Maybe he is calling you to some form of service in his Church. This strand will ask the Lord of the Harvest to send labourers into his harvest.

This new Vision is not a homework book or a checklist of new things to do. Parishes in the Diocese of Blackburn are heroic in the beauty of their witness to Christ and already do so much to be joyful followers of Jesus. No one expects every parish to do everything because this is a diocesan vision not a parish vision. The goal of our new Diocesan Vision is to inspire. It is to encourage. It is to give direction.

And above all its task is to draw you closer to the God we meet in Jesus Christ. Jesus, your king and your judge, is also your friend. He has saved you and loves you and will never let you go. That's why we are joyful followers of Jesus.