Considering the circumstances under which Paul wrote it, it really is quite remarkable that this letter should have become known as the ‘epistle of joy’. When we look more closely at what was going on in Paul’s life at the time, it’s hard to see what he’s got to be so joyful about.

For a start he’s in a Roman prison, chained up for his faith. We discovered this back in chapter 1: ‘...it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ...’ (verse 13). Secondly, he knows that he’s facing the distinct possibility of imminent death. Philippians 1.20: ‘It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death.’

Thirdly, even as he continues to live, he has no earthly security. As we shall discover in the final section in a few weeks’ time, glaning ahead to verses 11-12: ‘...I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need.’

And yet this is an epistle in which the theme of joy constantly recurs. Philippians 1.4: ‘...constantly praying with joy...’ Philippians 2.17: ‘even if I am being poured out... I am glad and rejoice with all of you’ Philippians 4.10: ‘I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me...’ And supremely, his instruction here in Philippians 4:4: ‘Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.’

Now the question for us this evening is this: where does joy like that come from? How can we put into practice what Paul tells us to do in rejoicing always? We’re going to look together for some clues in the surrounding passage.

1. THE FOCUS OF JOY.

The first comes verse 4: ‘Rejoice in the Lord always’ We take our cue from the psalmist in Psalm 43.4: ‘...God, my joy and my delight. I will praise you with the harp, O God, my God.’ We may not possess a harp or have much idea about how to play one. That doesn’t matter. What does matter is having God at the very centre of our lives as our joy and delight. And if we find ourselves thinking that we’ve gone off the boil as far as this is concerned and that, frankly, it would be easier to play the harp - let’s take time during this Holy Week to drink in the wonder of the love of God for us, to rekindle our passion for him as we reflect on how passionate he is about us, to uproot the things that have crept in to ease him out of pole position. ‘Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.’

On to verse 5 as Paul reminds us that the Lord we rejoice in ‘is near’. This means two things.

First, the Lord is near in the sense of being closer to us than anyone else. Whoever else we may lose, we cannot lose him. Whatever else we may lose, we cannot lose him. He will never let us down. He will always be there to be rejoiced in!

And secondly, the Lord is near in the sense of being just around the corner as he prepares to return to usher in the glorious fullness of his kingdom. He has promised to return and so return he will. Nothing can cause his promises to fail. Nothing can prevent him from doing what he chooses to do. In the light of his soon-to-be-revealed power, the difficulties we face now will fade into insignificance. So, since his coming again is so certain, let the fading into insignificance begin now! Let us look at our trying circumstances, not from the perspective of the present, but from the point of view of the future when they will all be swallowed up in the Lord’s victory. This is the Lord we rejoice in. This is the Lord who is to be the driving force behind our praise and worship. The Lord who is near. Let God himself be the focus of our joy.
2. FELLOWSHIP AND JOY.

Back for a moment to verses 2-3: ‘I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.’

The second clue is fellowship. There is joy in fellowship with others. There is misery where that fellowship breaks down. Now I don’t know how relevant this is for you, but if you are a Euodia or a Sytyche who need to ‘be of the same mind in the Lord’ with a brother or a sister, let me join Paul in pleading with you to do so. Joy will not be yours until you do. And notice the responsibility which the rest of us have: instead of leaving them to get on with it, we are to ‘help’ them. It’s not enough for our own personal relationships to be in good order. We have a responsibility for the relationships of other as well. We’re called to be bridge-builders, bringing people together in peace and reconciliation.

And by fellowship Paul doesn’t just mean the absence of bad vibes but also the positive presence of ‘Let your gentleness be known to everyone’ (4.5). A few years ago a friend and I were talking about a day when we had both been at a meeting in London. During the conversation he said this: ‘I particularly enjoyed your cutting remarks to so-and-so on Blackfriars Bridge!’ That really brought me up sharp! Is that how I want to be remembered? No. Let your gentleness be evident to everyone. What will people remember us for? If we were run over by a bus tomorrow, would we be missed? Or would everyone secretly heave a sigh of relief?

Gentleness builds unity while hardness causes disunity and disunity is like a cancer in the body. It leads to the body fighting itself and so being effectively prevented from doing anything constructive for anyone else. Joy and disunity cannot go together. Remember the words of Jesus: ‘So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift’ (Matthew 5.23-24). Joy depends on good relationships with others.

3. FREEDOM FOR JOY.

A third clue about joy is in verse 6: ‘Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.’ And just glance across at verse 19: ‘...my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.’ There’s no way he will need a bail-out from the EU. His account will never go into the red!

There’s something we need to be clear about: worry and anxiety are not simply a joy-destroying weaknesses to be struggled with but sin, to be confessed, repented and cleansed of. Being anxious is like carrying excess baggage - it weighs us down and distracts us. It’s sin because it’s saying to God either ‘I don’t believe in your ability to meet my needs’ or ‘I don’t believe in your willingness to do so’.

How are such burdens to be lifted? The answer is to pray. On our own and for each other. We’re to be constant (‘Do not worry about anything’). Specific (‘in everything by prayer and supplication’). And thankful (‘prayer and supplication with thanksgiving’).

The result? Verse 7: ‘And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus’. We will experience God’s peace guarding our hearts.

The story is told of a painting competition in which the artists were invited to paint a picture entitled ‘Peace’. Various works of art were submitted. Pastoral scenes, captivating sunsets, we can imagine the sort of thing. The winner was a painting of a violent storm at sea. A tall sailing ship was being tossed around by the waves. All seemed complete chaos and upheaval. Apart from in the crow’s nest, where the artist had depicted a bird which was calmly asleep, its head under one wing. “This is peace,” said the judge, “all the other entrants have painted stagnation!”

That’s right, isn’t it? It’s not that God clicks his fingers and all the problems go away but that he gives us the inner strength to stand firm in him.
4. FRAMEWORK FOR JOY.

Paul’s fourth clue is in 4.8: ‘Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.’ It’s obvious, isn’t it? We are not necessarily what we think we are but what we think, we are! What do we read? What do we watch? What do we play? Is there scope for reviewing these things? Joy isn’t an isolated thing but depends on the framework of what we take in and absorb into our lives. There’s much about the input we receive which we can’t choose, of course. But where we can make choices, Paul encourages us to choose wisely. Choose what goes with joy, not what clashes with it. Choose what creates joy, not what undermines it.

5. FOUNDATION OF JOY.

Our fifth and final clue comes in verse 9: ‘Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.’ The key to joy is practical obedience to what God requires. As Jesus promised, ‘If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete’ (John 15.10-11).

It’s all too easy for us to be what might be called ‘diabetic’ Christians. You know how with diabetes, patients need regular injections of insulin to keep their blood sugar at a healthy level. Without their insulin, they quickly become unwell and may even die. It is not God’s intention for us to be dependent on injections of joy from the outside, but to have an inner source that bubbles up all the time. How is your spiritual pancreas getting on?

There’s an old hymn which expresses it with crystal clarity and great simplicity: ‘Trust and obey, for there’s no other way to be happy in Jesus but to trust and obey.’

To sum up: joy comes from a clear focus on the Lord, fellowship with one another, freedom from anxieties, a framework based on the whole of life, founded on obedience to the Lord. Amen.