

Claudio thought the strawberries especially sweet that year. He was sitting in the central garden, the atrium of the household. It was late morning, and the sun was now smiling warmly over the garden wall, shining full on his face. The boy loved these spring mornings. Winter with its grey dawns and short, chilly dusks was almost over. The Mimosa trees were finally blossoming everywhere in the city. Just this morning, Cook had put the very first of the year's strawberries on the table for breakfast. These beautiful, dark red globes from farms outside the city wall along the Via Appia Nuova were always the very first sign that spring had finally moved in to stay.

The house where the boy Claudio lived was very different from your home and mine. In the Mediterranean region of that day, homes of families like Claudio's were all formed of a solid, brick outside wall with a high main entrance door at which the *ianitor*, the old doorkeeper sat. Visitors to the house walked through this high doorway into the central atrium, a paved area with walled gardens and a fountain.

The rooms of the house all faced inward toward this atrium. Since all these rooms were open to this central courtyard, from the atrium you could actually look into all house's various living spaces as the people of the household acted out their small dramas of daily life. Cook was in the kitchen kneading some dough that would doubtless be part of the evening meal. Claudio's mother was in the large living room supervising the decoration of the home with tall earthen-ware vases full of mimosa blossoms and the long feathery branches of newly budded peach trees. Septimus, the household's elderly accountant had already started going through the parchment scrolls at his oak desk. These scrolls contained the accounts that kept track of the family's farms on the western shore of Lake Albano. You could hear the soft, "chinc/chinc" of beads as the old slave's left hand riffled up and down over the table-top abacus. With his right hand, he wrote ledger entries using a reed pen. Septimus had been doing this for so long that he no longer even needed to look at the abacus while writing.

Elsewhere in the house, younger servants were sweeping the floors of the sleeping quarters, sorting some clean laundry which had arrived that morning from the fulleries, and tending the flower garden which surrounded the atrium's fountain. There was, of-course, no sign of Claudio's father who was an officer in the Seventh Legion, currently on campaign somewhere in northern Gaul. In fact, Claudio's father seldom returned home to his native Rome, except during a rare period of leave from his garrison.

Claudio closed his eyes and lifted his face back toward the sunlight. He popped another ripe, sweet strawberry into his mouth, listening to the trill of the tiny water-fall as it trickled into the fountain bowl. Yes, this was indeed a fine morning!

"Claudio, filium meum, vita mea I need you to do something for me." The boy opened his eyes. Claudio's mother had come to stand beside the place where he sat in the atrium. Next to her stood a small, slender girl with dark skin and eyes and even darker ringlet's of curly hair cascading beneath her white linen kerchief. The girl's name was Lucia, and she was probably the youngest servant in the house. Claudio knew that she and her family came from a place beyond the sea called Egypt. Though she was a good six inches shorter than Claudio, Lucia was probably just about his own age.

"Cook needs some fresh butter and Pecorino cheese to go with the rosemary bread she's baking for supper tonight," Claudio's mother said. "Will you please go with Lucia to the Forum and buy those for me."

Claudio sighed and stood up, brushing any lingering breakfast crumbs from the front of his tunic. His morning of daydreaming in the warm, spring sunlight was over. But the boy really didn't mind. A trip to the Roman market, the Forum was exciting! There was always something new and exotic to see since merchants gathered there from all over the Empire. So off the boy and girl went, through the high doorway, past Fabian, the ancient doorkeeper who was also nodding dreamily in the warm spring sunshine. They strode up the cobbled streets of the Via Nova past the Circus Maximus, toward the Capitoline Hill and the market area of central Rome.

As they were passing by a neighborhood of low-roofed, small houses that nestled against the city wall, Lucia turned left, off the main street into a darker side alley. "Where are you going?" asked Claudio. "I need to go to my house for just a moment," the girl said. "I didn't know your mother was going to send me to the market today, and I've left my shoulder satchel at home. I'll need it to carry what we buy. If you'll come with me, it will only take a moment."

Claudio agreed, and soon the boy and girl had arrived at a small, mud-brick house built right up against the city wall. The doorway to this tiny house was not high at all. In fact Claudio had to bend slightly to keep from cracking his head on the wooden lintel. As he did so, he noticed that right there on the cross beam above the door was a strange shape, a kind of amulet of some sort. It had been nailed to the lintel, and it looked for all the world like one of those crossed trees that were sometimes used by the authorities to execute the worst type of criminals.

No doorkeeper guarded the entryway to this modest home. But, it was still a Roman house, composed of a central courtyard surrounded by open rooms. The first person Claudio noticed in this house was a man sitting in the atrium on a low rock wall that encircled a tiny garden filled with yellow daffodils and red poppies. He was quite probably the oldest man Claudio had ever seen, so ancient that his hair had actually begun to turn from white to a kind of dull yellow. The man was seated, stooped over a cane made from a gum tree branch that still had the bark on it. He was obviously blind, since his eyes were completely opaque. And his skin had become so thin and transparent that you could trace the path his blood took, all the way down his spindly arms which were uncovered to drink in the early sunshine.

But the thing that struck Claudio in absolute amazement was the shining look of happiness which radiated from the face of the ancient blind man. His face shown with joy like a second sun on that spring morning. Lucia walked up to the old man and without saying anything, placed the outside of her fingers lovingly against his right cheek. The man reached up and took her hand in his twisted fingers. He must have recognized Lucia from by the shape and touch of the little girl's hand, because his joyous face beamed even more brightly. Lucia's own smile caught the joy-light shining from the old man and reflected it back to him.

Gentle singing came from a shoebox kitchen on the other side of the garden. He wandered over to that side of the house and saw a woman slicing vegetables in the slant-roofed kitchen. The ceiling was so low, the woman had to bend over nearly double as she worked. This was Lucia's mother. Claudio caught some of the words of the song she was singing, something about a man who had been killed but wasn't really dead.

The voice of the woman had a lilt and timbre to it that was quite lovely. But the thing that so amazed the boy was how happy this woman seemed to be as she worked in that cramped space to prepare the family's meager evening meal. Her face, like that of the old man

shone with the same glorious happiness, a more shimmering kind of joy than anything Claudio had ever known.

Just at that moment another man came through the doorway into the atrium carrying a large, wicker basket full of charcoal to use in the tiny oven. Lucia turned to embrace this new arrival, who was obviously her father. Once again Claudio was stunned by the radiance of shining joy and deep love that shone from this other man's face as well.

Much later that day, after Claudio's family had finished their evening meal the boy wandered back into the atrium of his own home to sit in his favorite place by the fountain. He was thinking. In fact he had been deep in thought just about the entire day. His mind kept wandering back to what he had seen in the small house where Lucia lived.

The people who lived there obviously had so very little; little in the way of food, little in the way of comfort, and obviously very little in the way of money. Yet there had been a kind of quiet contentment in all of them. They had something which made them different from anyone the boy had ever met. Their faces shimmered with a deep love and joy that was totally new to the boy. He had asked Lucia about this, and she had said something so very strange.

"Claudio, when your own father goes out among the people, everyone knows he is a Roman army officer because of the red Sagum Cloak he wears. That is his uniform. In the Forum today you could tell apart the Roman citizens from everyone else, because only citizen may wear the white toga. In a way, the toga is a kind of uniform too. But my people, we Christians are set apart from everyone else because of our joyous love for each other and for Our Lord. That is our mark, our uniform. You can always tell if someone is a follower of The Christ – you will always know if someone is a Christian by the look of joyous love on his face."

Claudio had been thinking about Lucia's remark for the rest of the day. What would it be like, he thought, to be so filled with joy and love that your face shone with it? How absolutely incredible to be so full of joy that it shone out to everyone around you! What a wondrous thing for a people to be known above all else by their shining joy.

To Shine with Joy (Reflections on Lk.9:28-36): During my sixteen years in Italy, I came to know the city of Rome as well as most people. The setting of this story reflects my understanding of the geographical and archeological details of what the city would have been like in the first century AD. My research indicates that the Romans did indeed eat strawberries – though whether for culinary or medicinal purposes is unclear. My delicious memories of what the strawberries are like in the early Roman spring from the fields around the city, in small towns like Nemi, Grottaferata and Castel Gandolfo are still with me in vivid detail!

To Shine with Joy is all about God's radiance. You can't talk about God without bringing light into it. The Transfiguration of Luke 9 places humankind into almost direct contact with the heavenly throne room. So, of course there is an abundance of brilliant light there on the mountain top when Jesus is transfigured into his heavenly form. In very literal terms, light might be as close as we will ever come to understanding the quality that best defines how God shows Himself to His children.

The New Testament is full of references linking God to light. In the Gospels of Mark and Luke, Jesus assures His disciples that they are meant to be a light that everyone can see (see Mk.4:21-22 and Luke 8:17). During the Sermon on the Mount from Matthew, Christ tells his followers that if they will only keep their eyes fixed on those treasures stored in heaven, their

whole bodies will be full of light (see Mt.6:19-22). In Zechariah's beautiful prophetic song from the beginning of Luke, God's tender mercy is likened to a radiance which dawns from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness (see Luke1: 78-79). And of course, the opening of John's mighty gospel is full of God light.

The Old Testament is replete with God-light too. Among the numerous Messianic prophecies in Isaiah, God links the advent of His Son to the coming of light into a darkened world (see Is. 42:16). In Exodus 33, we discover that God is so radiant in His real presence, that no living human being can behold the brilliance of His glory and still live (see Ex.33:19-23). And in the next chapter, we read that whenever Moses spent time in the presence of The Lord God on Mount Sinai, he had to cover his face with a veil, since just being exposed to the Glory of The Lord, the *Shekinah Glory*, made Moses' face too radiant to behold (see Ex.34:33-35).

This last account of the reflected radiance of the Shekinah Glory perhaps comes closest to what I have tried to say about God in **To Shine with Joy**. In his brilliant and timeless little book *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis likens the Christian community to a group of mirrors reflecting the light of God.¹ That's what is going on in the story.

Modern Christians have the wonderful gift of God's Word in the Holy Bible. But this book didn't really exist until sometime in the 4th Century AD, or perhaps even later. Yet, by the time of John's Revelation, around 95 AD the Christian faith had already spread as far as Laodicea in the center of modern-day Turkey (see Rev.3:14-21). About that same time, Christianity had become such a widespread phenomenon that the Jews convened in Rabbinic Council in Jamnia found it necessary to issue a proclamation severing theological ties with the new Christian communities, known as the *Birkat ha-Minim* (literally "The Benediction against the Christians").² Even earlier, we know that the Christian community had become so prevalent in Rome that various Imperial Edicts were put in place banishing Christians from the city during the reigns of multiple Caesars. Indeed, many scholars think that the Great Fire of AD 64 was actually set by Nero so that he could clear away a burgeoning Christian community from ground inside the city of Rome, an area which the Emperor had selected as the site for a new building project.³

What was it that caused the Christian community to grow with such tremendous speed and force during these first decades after the Resurrection? It could not have been the sharing of God's Word either orally or through written accounts, since the Bible as we know it did not yet exist. Surely, the Holy Spirit was a powerful wave of conviction and conversion in this period, but the Holy Spirit was a gift to those who believed and were Baptized, not to those who were yet to be converted. So what was it that fueled the wild-fire spread of Christianity in these first decades of the new faith?

I believe it was the radiant God light that **To Shine with Joy** talks about, which attracted so many to this new religion of hope. How could people living under the iron fist of Roman

¹ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Harper Collins, 1952) 164.

² After the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD, the Sanhedrin Court, the ruling council of the city withdrew to the town of Jamnia, also called Yavne. Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai founded a school of theology there which became a prevalent source for the Mishnah, the earliest written redaction of Jewish oral tradition. In about 90 AD, Ben Zakkai is believed to have convened a Rabbinic Council that, among other things, codified a specific prayer cursing the Christians, which has become known in theology as the *Birkat ha-Minim*, the "Benediction Against the Christians." It's interesting to note that this prayer was written at the invitation of Gamaliel II, who may well have been the Grandson of St. Paul's teacher (see Acts 5:34, 22:3).

³ Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity*, Vol. 1 – quoting *The Annals of Tacitus 15.44* (Prince, 1984), 34-35.

authority NOT be attracted to persons exuding such joy and peace, even amidst the poverty and persecution which were so much the hallmarks of the early Christian community?

In the end, this story contains a message of sadness for the modern day Christian. If one reflects even briefly on the image that this present world has of the committed Christian, it is certainly not one of exuberant joy in the Lord. Instead, secular society generally perceives the “serious” Christian as being a dour, narrow-minded person of extreme moral rigor. The modern-day image of the Christian is not unlike the picture of those somber men dressed all in the same black-and-white, high-colored suits on the Dutch Masters Cigar box in which I used to keep my childhood treasures.

It’s a tragic thought as to how many souls have been lost because the Christian community of today has forgotten that the most important testimony we have for the rest of the world is that shining, joyous radiance which we are called to reflect into a dark and hurting planet. That’s really what **To Shine with Joy** is all about.



Madonna of the Eucharist,
a detail from one of the
many roadside shrines
which populate the
walking trails near Bad
Bleiberg in the region of
Carinthia in Lower Austria
(Summer, 2011).

These shrines are truly a
blessing, and lead to
wonderful prayer-walking