

Sermon by Bishop Richard Harries on Sunday 5th September 2021

Trinity 14

St Mary's, Barnes

HAPPINESS?.....or BLESSEDNESS?

In recent years there have been several attempts to measure, not just a country's economic performance but the happiness of its citizens. In the latest index Finland comes out top, as it has done for a few years, the UK being 17th, below Germany but above France and the USA. I welcome this measure, it helps to put economic output in perspective. After all, what is the point of a country getting richer and richer if its people are getting unhappier and unhappier. But it does of course pose the question of what happiness is.

I think we can distinguish three kinds of ordinary human happiness. Ecstatic or delirious happiness, as when someone first falls in love; fulfilled happiness, as when a person does a job of work well. There may be major challenges as in parenting, but for a parent who sees their children developing well, there can be a deep fulfilment. Then there is quiet contentment, say a couple at the end of their lives, not doing anything very exciting, but content, so far as health allows. I welcome all three kinds of happiness, delirious, fulfilled and content, but none of this gets to the heart of the matter as posed for example by Aristotle 2500 years ago.

For him we had first to ask 'What is it to be a human being?' If you are a cat happiness consists presumably in lying, purring in the sun. But we are different from cats. We are rational beings. For Aristotle, happiness consists in the proper function of our rational nature. It was not to do in the first place with feelings but with mind, with mind adhering to the truth.

From a Christian point of view, we are not just minds, we are whole persons, body, mind, and spirit, made in the image of God and called to grow into his likeness. That is the essence of who we are. That is

what it is to be a human being. Happiness comes in fulfilling our nature understood in that way.

But this also raises the question then whether happiness is an adequate word for what we want to describe. When in 1927, T. S. Eliot became a Christian he wrote 'To me, religion has brought not happiness, but the sense of something above happiness.'

The Bible is quite clear what this is. It is blessedness. The Hebrew scriptures are full of such statements as 'Blessed is the person who trusts in God'. 'Blessed is the one who walks in the way of the lord'. 'Blessed are those whose strength is in him.'

Interestingly the Hebrew word for Blessed in the Greek New Testament is translated as Makarios, which in some modern versions is rendered 'happy', as in 'Happy are the poor in Spirit'; 'Happy are the meek' and so on of the Beatitudes, but I think it is probably better to keep to the old version here. 'Blessed are...

So, not happiness but blessedness, that is what the Christian faith says is offered to us human beings, classically set out in the Beatitudes. Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst to see right prevail, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers.

These are those who in the Old Testament, especially in the Psalms, are called collectively called the anawim, the poor. These are people who trust in God, seek to walk in his way, look to him to ultimately right all the wrong of the world with the establishment of his rule or kingdom, and who seek to live in it now. They are defined not primarily by their poverty, though they are likely to be among those who lose out in a wicked world, but by their relationship to God. These are the people Jesus is referring to. These are the blessed. Blessed even now among the travails of this world with something that cannot be destroyed, and which finds its completion in heaven.

That is the heart of the matter. But that having been said, it does not mean we should in anyway belittle such ordinary human happiness as

this life affords. The world, as created by God is fundamentally good, and there are ordinary good simple pleasures to be found in it, including on occasion ecstasy, fulfilment, and contentment. The psalmist said ‘In thy presence is the fullness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore. In the light of that Eternal pleasure, we do not reject the wholesome pleasures that life affords, a nice meal with family and friends, a walk in the country, a vigorous game of sport, a good book or film, a favourite hobby or whatever it might be. These are to be received and enjoyed with gratitude.

This does however raise a major question. How can we fully relax and enjoy life when there is so much suffering in the world? There is a sentence of Pascal which Rouault chose as the title of one of his paintings of Christ on the cross. ‘Jesus is in agony until the end of the world.’ To be in Christ is to share that identification with the anguish of the world. But Christ is also risen, ascended glorified, at one with eternal joy, and sharing that joy with his followers. How do we hold the two together? Or to put it in more down to earth terms, to shut out the pain of the world is to make ourselves as stones, as less than human. But to open ourselves to it all the time would be to be broken on the rack of human suffering, as well as undervaluing the gift of the ordinary human happiness that can still be found. These are very difficult questions to which I am not going to attempt to give a theoretical answer. I will however try to give some practical guidance for Christian living.

First, ordinary human pleasures should be received as a gift, which they are. C. S. Lewis, as so often, is good on this. He tells us that he tries to ‘read’ pleasures as the touch of heaven upon him and writes ‘If I could be what I aim at being, no pleasure would be too ordinary or usual for such reception; from the first taste of air when I look out of the window, one’s whole cheek becomes a sort of palate down to one’s soft slippers at bedtime. ‘

Secondly, when we become aware of some human suffering, whether in Afghanistan, or closer to home in the lives of those we know, instead of just feeling or saying how awful it all is, we can ask ourselves if there is anything I ought to be doing, and whether there is or not can simply say 'Lord Jesus have pity'.

But both these responses are to be seen and lived against the background that we have been called to share in God's blessedness. When we leave this service, we hear the words 'The blessing of God.

We go forth as those who are blessed. Against that background, the anguish of the world is not the last word. Against that background, the happiness, as it is received as the touch of heaven, is enhanced.