

## Epiphany 6

(An illustration of a basket and covering plastic bag insert.)

We often do this, don't we? We turn something of beauty, well at least interesting respectableness, into a non-descript, perhaps ugly, object for the sake of being practical and functional. Here the plastic bag helps preserve the object, and it is simpler to dispose of the rubbish. But we have lost the beauty, charm of the basket itself.

What has this got to do with us today, and this congregation at this particular time?

Well, I think in the church (and not just in this church) we worry too much about the functionality of the institution ... the buildings, the toilets, the committees, the structures, the budgets and we forget the treasures, the beauty and the joy of our faith. The message of hope and of transformed lives are somehow covered over with a very large plastic bag.

As you know, I am a long standing church bureaucrat; I happen to believe structures are important; but we too easily forget that we really only exist as the body of Christ to share in the fullness of life, the joy of living and the hope we have. And today are readings push this theme – they are about what I am sure most people want in their lives; and that is happiness. Surely people want happiness, and not useful, practical plastic bags, and how to do personal administration better!

So – are you happy? If not, why not? Would you like to be? Where do you find happiness?

I think these are important questions of living; they certainly are questions we all seek an answer for, and yet I am constantly amazed and surprised that we find them such difficult questions. All want it, but just so many never find it. They can find it for a time, and then it vanishes; indeed some find their quest for happiness is so forlorn, impossible they sadly seek to give up on living.

So what do we need to do to find happiness?

Here we go; you are encouraged to use our mobile phones in church – key in “find happiness” in your search engine and what does your search reveal? What are we to do?

It is like going to a bookshop (remember those) and looking at the wellbeing, or health, or self help section. Books about

Astrology. Tarot

Health, or more likely, dieting

Crystals, dreams and what we once called New Age

And then how to be rich; retire by 35; or own 100 investment properties etc.

Even how to make your pets happy.

I think we must be a very unhappy lot, if we are so desperately searching for happiness. And indeed with the election campaign looming, we are going to be reminded all the time, how unhappy, fearful and worried we actually are.

Again – I suppose it is a personal question – but are you happy? Yes, there may be limitations on you because of – health, wealth, age – whatever, but within those limitations, do you still have a sense of self esteem, self worth; do you know you are loved and accepted, do you have sense of joy to be

alive, and through service for others, share this love and joy. Is your life governed by hope and not fear. Are you happy?

It is interesting that right at the beginning of Jesus' ministry (at least recorded by Matthew and Luke), Jesus addresses this question of happiness. I would suggest it is obviously important. It is an essential longing. And as we can see also from our other readings, our Psalm and from the prophet Jeremiah, scripture has always seen this question to be important. What we have today is the Luke version of the Beatitudes – which is just a fancy word for those who are blessed. Indeed in some translation of scripture – in instead of the word blessed; *makarioi* is translated as happy, 'happy are those who...' Now usually we refer to the beatitudes from Matthew's gospel (at Edna's funeral they were read, and they came from Matthew's gospel), but today they are from Luke, and there are some differences. There are more of them in Matthew, but more significantly Luke has a harder, sharper edge than Matthew. So in Matthew it is for example "blessed are the poor in spirit"; in Luke it is just simply "blessed are the poor". And in Luke, not only are there blessings – happy are those who . . . , there are also a parallel list of woes, "woe to those who are rich, or woe to those who are full (satisfied) etc".

So what is Jesus' advice on finding happiness, being blessed?

Basically Jesus just turns our values, and where and how we seek happiness on its head. All of those, books, blogs with their 8, 10, 12 whatever 'steps to happiness' is not to be found here. There is no quick route to happiness.. No, first you do this, then you do that. **Rather he presents a basic principle which will undergird our happiness.** In a nutshell, Jesus sees there is a choice between two perceptions of reality, two very different world views, if you like there are two motivational and reward systems. For ease of reference you might call these a worldly approach; and a spiritual approach – though those are quite inadequate terms. . . because at the end of the day there are crossovers between the two.

So for Jesus, looking at his woes, happiness does not come from just getting rich, or living high on the hog, living well, or being famous – having every one speak well of you; or you having a dream run with health, career and relationships – or as we might say 'your laughing'. Jesus wants to say there is more to it, much more to happiness – possibly even a reversal of all those goals which we value so much today.

Jesus essentially makes two points.

The first is that the little people are blessed. Don't assume only a small section of our community can actually be happy. All can be happy.

Blessed are the poor, the hungry, those who weep and those who are excluded, despised – those on the outer. Those we look down on can be happy. Today with social media we are instantly made to feel inadequate if we lack certain traits or things. If we don't have certain fashions, eat particular food, engage in particular activities. We are not happy. Happiness equates with what the crowd, the in-crowd is doing. Jesus rather is saying that all can have and experience the blessing of God, lead a fulfilling life, be happy, even though you do not conform to these worldly standards. The poor can be happy. The despised can feel happy; you would be surprised who can be happy!

This is not a statement we should strive to live in abject poverty, or we should seek to starve ourselves, or submit to disease – so bizarrely we might be happy. Indeed for poverty, hunger and sickness to exist that is unjust, unfair and is not God's will. We as the Church should always be vigilant to address such inequality and unfairness. It is what the prophets did. However, the little

person, or as we would say in Australia – ‘the battler’ – should disregard the world’s judgement on them; because in God’s sight they in fact are blessed. Happiness for the Christian is not denying or avoiding the reality we face – like poverty, hardship and a harsh life – but within that reality, we can feel loved and accepted by God.

The second point is far more difficult, challenging. I think we can accept that you don’t need to be rich, or famous, or stunningly fit and beautiful to be happy. However, we do find ourselves singled out on his ‘woe’ side of equation. We are the rich, the full, the laughing and the well respected. In relation to the rest of the world we are just so well off and fortunate. And we can’t step around Luke’s very blunt language (as opposed to Matthew’s rather spiritual, almost watered down – ‘poor in spirit’). Luke just says it plainly:

Woe to you rich, for you have received your consolation.

In other words, if money is your happiness, and you have got money (or rich in comparison to others on this planet), well – you have got what you want. But that is all you have. So, let us say you lost your fortune, you will have lost your happiness. Or if fame was your thing, and it disappeared – then misery. Or health is gone – then everything goes.

The point is, life is not so one dimensional.

Jesus turns upside down our understanding of where happiness comes from: it is not merely from our tangible situation – wealth, health and fame; it comes from the depth of who we are, the very depth of our being. If you like our relationship with God. At this point the image of Jeremiah is helpful: blessed are they who trust in the Lord . . . they are the ones like a tree planted by the water sending roots into the stream and when difficulties come, say heat and drought, or flood and rain – it will continue to bear fruit. And this image of the tree, is the same image we have from Psalm 1. A happy person is literally a well grounded, well rooted person – with inherent strength and beauty. Like a tree beside a stream.

I remember reading a book written by the Belgian Catholic theologian, Edward Schillebeeckx. It was intriguingly called ‘I am a happy theologian’. The book was really quite amazing; he had every reason to call his book ‘I am an unhappy theologian’. He had been criticised, sacked, dealt with unfairly by the Catholic Church, abused – but he was happy. He was sure of God’s love and life giving spirit. Happiness transcended his actual situation. He was sure of the hope he had in Christ. His happiness, his joy ran deep within him. It drew on the lifegiving stream of God’s love. This did not need the values of the world to confirm he was happy. He knew. He was like a tree beside a stream.

Where do you find happiness?

I hope you hear the good news, we all may be happy; it is not just something for the rich and famous. But I also hope you hear the challenge. The challenge is the need to reassess, constantly reassess, our priorities whether that which is bringing joy is actually beginning to control us, like wanting more and more money – and thereby diminish our happiness.

There is good news here. Helping people be happy surely is a good thing we can do at church. It is the beauty of the basket, not the practical functionality of the plastic bag. How do we do this? Well living out our joy, happiness, enthusiasm for life that will look attractive for others would be a place to begin. In other words, be a community in which the beatitudes are evident and real.