

Pastoral Letter
on
Seeking Happiness

(To be read at all Masses on the First Sunday of Advent
29/30 November 2009)

My dear People,

Throughout Advent there is a note of underlying joy and expectancy. It reaches its height on the third Sunday of Advent as the feast of the birth of Christ draws near. We are exhorted: “to exult for joy in the Lord” and “be happy at all times”.

Recently, I was intrigued to read that the head teacher of a school was going to instruct his pupils in how to be happy. He explained his thinking: he said: “helping to produce happy young adults when they leave school at eighteen is my highest priority as Head”. He went on to ask: “What do we value most for our young people or our own children. Good results? Achievement? Those may be obvious, but if we probe further and deeper surely it is fulfilment and happiness”.

Let me outline three things that I feel contribute towards happiness.

The first is to have **meaning and purpose in our lives**.

So much emphasises in our society is placed on celebrity and achievement. Surely, much more important is the fulfilment of our gifts, whatever they may be, so that we feel we are making a contribution to our society. Jesus did not so much speak of the crowds or the masses, but rather of ‘a certain man, a certain woman’. He emphasised the value and dignity of each.

The second contribution towards happiness is **relationships**.

Good relationships lie at the heart of a happy life and are based on a strong moral code of caring for the other and being loyal. Our emotional security and acceptance of self is primary if we are to reach out to others. Usually, our inner security comes from those earliest years of our life through receiving consistent love which reassures us that we are lovable, and so can then reach out to others in friendship. We have to remember, too, that friendship is a two way thing. As the poet Emerson said: “to have a friend you must be a friend”. Most of us have to cope at some moment of our lives with negative feelings – rejection, hurt, illness, bereavement, breakdown in relationships – all kinds of trials that life can throw at us. If we do not learn to cope and face such difficulties then there can be a temptation to different forms of escapism in order to anaesthetise the pain. That is certainly not the road to happiness.

I have left the third and most important until last – **Faith.**

True and lasting happiness is also a deeply spiritual quest transcending one's own self. We all need a point of reference outside of ourselves, a scaffold of beliefs and values to help shape our lives. For Christians, it must be the person of Jesus and His Gospel. Strive, so that Jesus becomes real for you as a person, rather than notional. In each being there is a religious instinct. This must be so, since we are made by God and for God. If we seek other idols and substitutes we can never be deeply or lastingly happy. Jesus is the well-spring of all our deepest yearning. There is an incompleteness in our lives without God. As Julian Barnes the author wrote: "I do not believe in God, but I miss Him."

Those words could well sum up many in our society in recent years. As the Governor of the Bank of England warned: "The nice decade is over". Ease of acquisition tended to fuel an explosion of consumer-centred selfishness. The *god of the market* is dead and has proved a false god. Whilst we all feel for those who have lost their jobs and are experiencing hardship, perhaps now is a favourable time to look with a more critical eye on the relationship between acquisition and fulfilment. Increased wealth does not automatically bring increased happiness. Indeed we must not look for unalloyed happiness this side of heaven. God has placed, what George Herbert calls a 'repining restlessness' within us, so that we will not find ultimate rest and happiness outside of Himself.

Perhaps this year, in a more restrained climate, we can once again 'reclaim Christmas' and experience something of the peace and joy Christ came to bring.

+ Thomas McMahon
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