

## A SERMON IN KING'S COLLEGE CHAPEL

### *All Saints*

A couple of weeks ago there was a special colloquium here at King's on happiness in literature. The participants were all doubtless intrigued not only to get a firmer grasp on what the word in featured English literature in recent centuries but also wondering what the word means for them as individuals.

One of the several puzzles that quickly comes to the surface in this area is that when we think about our own happiness we realize that it often occurs when we don't really expect it to, and yet when we try to be happy we often enough fail. Certainly happiness doesn't seem to be something you can manufacture, as every child who finds themselves crying at their own birthday party comes to realise.

On the other hand if there's one thing that we'd *like* to organise for ourselves happiness is probably it. Certainly it's not uncommon for parents to restrain from articulating ambitions for their children other than 'as long as they are happy'.

If there were a recipe for personal happiness we would probably all be using it, of course, but somehow that just doesn't seem to be the way it works. We are suspicious of 'quick fixes' as they work short-term but mess us up long-term.

The best secular wisdom on the subject seems to be that the most we can do in terms of making ourselves happy is to play the probabilities. There are conditions in which, if you are lucky, you will find yourself happy, so it is in your best interest to try to inhabit those conditions. *But there's no guarantee.* You can have a lovely suburban house a steady income two beautiful children and a Labrador but you might just find the whole business nauseatingly dull, or you might develop a terrible disease, or house prices might crash and you find your lovely home represents not security but negative equity. Or you could go on a cruise, get food poisoning and have a fortnight of misery.

There are some who question whether happiness ever happens, whether it is just an illusion. My own experience is that it does, but that it can be spoilt or even destroyed once you start to think about it or monitor it, because happiness involves

a degree of self-forgetfulness or absorption in matters outside yourself. So if you are ever happy and someone asks you if you are happy the right answer might be - 'well I was until you asked me about it.'

Today we are celebrating the Festival of All Saints - and the saints are those who enjoy what the New Testament calls 'beatitude' that is, in plain English, happiness. Our gospel reading reminded us of the beatitudes of Jesus as recorded by Luke. I say reminded but they are not the familiar beatitudes, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit for they shall see God' and so on. No, that's Matthew's version from the Sermon on the Mount. We don't know, of course, what Jesus actually said, but Luke heard a more challenging message than Matthew, and expressed more directly.

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

Jesus' message about happiness is not that you should play the probabilities, or try to position yourself so that you have the best possible chance of being happy. Rather it is the reverse, that you should recognise and appreciate that it is often, if not always, that it is the difficulties, the deprivations, the unfortunate events, indeed all the negatives of life that might just open the door to true happiness.

There is a deep truth in this, which is something to do with the need to balance our personal desire for happiness with our actual concern and compassion for people who don't have the ability or resource to maximise their probabilities of happiness in this life. But the truth is also deep because it recognizes that the ultimate source of happiness, and the ultimate form of happiness, is to be found in our relationship with God, which involves embracing life as we find it, finding ways to love our neighbours, and dedicating ourselves not to the pursuit of happiness but to serving our fellow human beings in their need, distress and unhappiness.

Happiness for Christians is sanctity, and the message of All Saints day is that sanctity is for everyone as it involves responding well to life's difficulties, trials and deprivations.

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Daniel 7. 1-3, 15-18; Luke 6.20-31*