

At the entrance to Disneyland in California is a sign that reads: “Disneyland — the happiest place on earth.” Millions of people have come from all over the world to visit and partake of the happiness it was designed to create. Happiness is something that humans seek naturally. We are all on a pleasure hunt. Yet the more earnestly we pursue happiness, the more elusive it becomes.

The Christian life when pursued brings rather quickly to the stunning realisation that happiness is a by-product of our simplest activities. Jesus goes beyond that today and indicates in this passage from St Matthew which we call the Beatitudes, that happiness is possible even in the midst of negative experiences. If that is possible, it is certainly something we need to hear — we who must deal with the loss of loved ones, the loss of a job, or the loss of property. What do these words of Jesus mean?

For one thing, from the illustrations he used, I think Jesus was pointing out that happiness is related to the attitude we bring to the experience. “Blessed,” he said, “are the poor in spirit...” The word that is translated “blessed” is translated as “happy” in many of the more modern translations of the Bible. Those translators wanted to use a word that would be more in keeping with the way we speak today. I will follow their lead and use “happy” in place of “blessed.”

Somehow we have been taught to believe that to be happy we need to be in control. I saw a cartoon in which a fellow was bowed in prayer. He was saying, “God, can you help me, but sort of make it look like I did it all myself?” If we can’t be in control we certainly want it to look like we are in control. But to be spiritually poor means to recognise that there are many areas in which we are not in control.

Robert Schuller, in his book *The Be-Happy Attitudes* tells of being brought up in America in an Iowa farm family where there was always plenty of home-baked bread, butter, pies, and other desserts. As a consequence, he says, he has always had a problem with weight. He eventually decided to eat only lean meats, vegetables, and fresh fruit for dessert. One night a few years ago someone took him to dinner and raved about the fresh warm bread as he spread it with butter. Schuller had some. “You must try the steak with bernaise sauce,” said the host. Schuller followed the advice. After the steak, the host continued, “They make the best pie here, with a chocolate crust. You can’t pass it by.” Schuller had a piece. He calculated in that one meal he took in about 3,000 calories. That night he was depressed and filled with remorse that he did not have the strength to get rid of his fat. He says he prayed asking Jesus to help him. As long as he felt that he could safely eat a little here and a little there and still remain in control, he was doomed. But when he cried out for help and admitted that he couldn’t control his appetite by himself, he was freed from his addiction. Happiness can come in the midst of our misery when we acknowledge that we have a need and we are spiritually poor.

“Happy are those who are meek,” says Jesus. The word “meek” more or less means humble. We have been taught by our experiences that it is important to be right. In a Peanuts cartoon Peppermint Patty says, “I need some good advice, Roy. What do you do when something you had really counted on doesn’t happen? This thing I really believed would happen but didn’t happen. What do I do?” “Well,” says Roy, “you could admit you were wrong.” “Yeah,” says Peppermint Patty, “besides that, I mean.” As long as we nurture our pride, it keeps us from growing, learning, and becoming all we are capable of becoming.

A young John Henry Newman as a curate writing to his father:

“When I was up at University, I discovered that I was only an average student. And now I’ve discovered that I am only an average curate. There are better preachers than I am; better teachers, better pastors and better administrators. I keep making silly mistakes and sometimes I don’t know how to rectify them. However, I’ve also discovered that my talents, limited though they may be, are useful. I have a place in the church and the world. No, I’ll never be the finest, but as long as I do the best I can with what God has given me, it will have not have been in vain.” Which was most certainly the case! He found happiness in his humility. Those who are **not** filled with pride and concerned with who gets the credit are worth a thousand who are, and can be very useful in extending Christ’s kingdom. Their happiness comes from being useful.

“Happy are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,” says Jesus. These are people who want to do God’s will. We have been subjected to the idea that happiness involves being able to do pretty much as we please with little concern for how it affects others. Much of modern Australian society decides whether or not a thing is wrong by trying to work out if they are likely to get caught and not what effect it will have on others. They are concerned only about their own will, not God’s will. Over and over Jesus taught and demonstrated that God’s will for us involves helping others and that in our helping we find happiness.

“Happy are the pure in heart,” says Jesus. Purity of heart means sincerity, having unmixed motives. Jesus says those without guile without mixed motives, those whose hearts are pure, will see God. Those without mixed motives find happiness because they have no hidden agenda, they are genuinely pleased with the advancement of others, and they have no secret resentment that the interests of others have been advanced. They are made happy by the good fortune of others.

Not only do these words of Jesus suggest that happiness is related to attitude, they suggest that it is also the result of certain actions. Jesus says, “Happy are those who mourn.” It seems unlikely to us that happiness and mourning go together. Certainly we would not expect one who is mourning a loss to feel happy, but mourning touches the deepest that is within us and helps us to identify with others, to be compassionate.

When we mourn, we learn to have compassion for others. One of the godly uses of our own sorrows, hurts, and sufferings is the way in which we can thereby be trained to understand and mourn the hardships of others.

Jesus goes on to say, “Happy are the merciful.” Something inside of us prefers revenge over mercy for those who have wronged us. The nineteenth-century German writer and poet Heinrich Heine once wrote: “My nature is the most peaceful in the world. All I ask is a simple cottage, a decent bed, good food, some flowers in front of my window, and a few trees beside my door. Then if God wanted to make me wholly happy, He would let me enjoy the spectacle of six or seven of my enemies dangling from those trees. I would forgive them all wrongs they have done me — forgive them from the bottom of my heart, for we must forgive our enemies. But not until they are hanged!” One cannot help but feel that whatever satisfaction Heine would have received from such a sight, it would not have produced any long-term happiness. It is when we return good for evil that we show whose people we are. In the long run happiness lays not in revenge, but in mercy and forgiveness.

“Happy are the peacemakers,” continues Jesus. Contemporary wisdom advises us to mind our own business and let others look out for themselves. When someone else has a problem, the rest of us feel we will be a lot happier if we don’t get involved. But the reality is that we cannot have peace if others do not have justice. Justice works on the principle of fairness for all. Where the rights of others are ignored, abused, violated, or taken away, the seeds of bitterness and hostility are sown and there will not be peace for anyone.

Peacemaking means getting involved in the struggle for justice and making that struggle our own, even if it temporarily unsettles our peace. One more thing these words of Jesus suggest is that our happiness is not dictated by our circumstances. He illustrates this by saying, “Happy are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake.” Righteousness means doing what God requires. Most of us have learned to do what is expedient: don’t make waves, blend in, go with the flow. To act on principle certainly can be costly.

What are the circumstances that we face? The loss of someone who gave life meaning? The loss of a job that provided for home and family and gave us fulfilment? The loss of health and independence? Are we to pretend that these things are unimportant — that they don’t affect our happiness?

These words of Jesus do not suggest our circumstances do not cause us pain. If we are human, if we love someone or enjoy something, we will eventually know loss and that will produce pain. If there is anything called happiness, it will be in spite of our difficulties and not because we have managed to avoid them. Some of our difficulties will create happiness in the long run because they will change our attitude from focus on ourselves to focus on others. Some of our difficulties will create happiness because they will cause us to act on behalf of others. Some of our difficulties will create happiness only when we recognise that God has a plan for the world, which has been advanced a little because we have sought to identify with it. In every one of these Beatitudes Jesus concludes that God will have the last word, but he also promises that that word will be good. Therein lays our hope.

Fr Robert Newton

1) Robert Schuller *The Be-Happy Attitudes* Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1985, pp. 33-34