

St Benedict
(Proverbs 2:1-19 / Matthew 5:1-11)
11.07.2019

One word resounds throughout today's gospel text: it is the word *happy*.

As I 'savoured' this word happy it in my *lectio divina* of the Beatitudes, I thought of the multiple evocations of happiness we find in the Sacred Scriptures. Quickly I found myself paying particular attention to the notions of happiness developed in the Book of Psalms. It seemed right to pay particular attention to the Psalter since this collection of prayers formed the staple diet of our Holy Father Benedict himself – just as it was that of those who preceded him in pre-Benedictine monasticism and as it remains the staple diet of those who live Benedictine life today.

It is surely significant that the very first word of the Book of Psalms is *happy*.

Psalms 1 opens with the line: *Happy indeed is the one ...* and then goes on to speak of the importance of upright living, guided by the precepts of wisdom.

In the Prologue to his Rule for Monks, echoing the words of another psalm, Benedict poses this question: *Who is the one who yearns for life and wishes to know happy days?* At this point he goes on to indicate to his readers (to us) that the way to happiness is through living one's life in accord with the teaching of the Sacred Scriptures – especially the gospels which Benedict refers to as *the surest guide for our lives*.

There can be no doubt that for Benedict true happiness is to be found by living in *the spirit of the Beatitudes* we heard Jesus pronounce in this morning's gospel passage.

Just what does that mean?

The answer to that question is clear, even if we can find it somewhat disconcerting. The teaching of Jesus' *Happiness Sayings* turns much of what has been ingrained in us from other quarters completely upside down. The Beatitudes contradict so much of what we would prefer to believe. For example, we don't usually associate *mourning, poverty, hunger, thirst, persecution* with happiness and so it cannot but surprise us that Jesus does. If the Beatitudes are filled with apparent contradictions, should this really surprise us? After all, the Beatitudes are all about helping us situate ourselves properly in life. Is it not true that life presents itself to so many of us, so much of the time, as full of contradictions? Even if we don't associate much of what we hear of the harsh realities of life named in the Beatitudes with happiness, Jesus clearly does and He invites us to do so.

Given the centrality of the word *happy* in the Beatitudes, what I propose to do this morning is simply this: to share with you a few random thoughts on happiness – happiness as it is spoken of here and there in various passages of the Bible.

Overall, what can we say about the Bible's teaching on happiness?

First of all, we can say that it is a God-given gift and like all God's gifts it is good. Furthermore, like most good things, happiness is beautiful, precious and fragile.

The second thing we can say is that quite often happiness is given to us in places where we would least expect to find it and at times that can well and truly surprise us.

The Bible shows us again and again how happiness is given to us at those moments in our lives when the going is particularly tough, when life is hard and we find ourselves really challenged by what comes our way.

Happiness is found in these unlikely circumstances for a particular reason: the fact that we will usually strive to live through life's trials and difficulties not alone but with God. One psalm speaks of *fullness of joy, true happiness*, being found in God's presence. Another psalm speaks of happiness being found *at God's right hand* – that is, by our holding ourselves close to Him.

St Benedict's whole propose is to have those who follow his *little Rule for Beginners* living in a constant awareness of God's presence. This is the foundation upon which he reposes the central chapter of the Rule: chapter 7 – the chapter entitled *On Humility*. The Benedictine monk – and not just the monk, but every Christian – as long as he or she is living *with God, walking humbly in God's presence*, no matter what his or her life's circumstances, can and will find happiness.

For Benedict, guided by the teaching of the Scriptures, happiness is the fruit of holiness. For the *Father of Western Monasticism* the fruit of consecrated living is joy in the depths of one's heart. True joy is the blessing that comes from living a life full of mercy and gentleness, compassion and love. Beatitude is the grace offered to those who see God for who and what He is: a good and loving God, a God full of mercy and compassion, gentleness and benevolent love.

Pope Francis places great emphasis upon the link between happiness and holiness in his Encyclical Letter *The Joy of the Gospel*. For him to be holy is to be happy and to be happy is a sign of holiness.

Nothing makes us happy like love!

Happiness, a loving happiness, is the attitude of heart of one who is able to recognise God's loving presence and His blessing to be at work in his or her life, as it is: that's to say, with its challenges, as well as its recompenses; with its difficulties as well as its joys. It is the gift of the person who is filled with simple thankfulness – and this whatever befalls him or her along life's way.

I am sure, like me, you have all met people who have legitimate reasons to grumble and complain, to feel badly done by and sorely afflicted by their life circumstances – often unjust, unfortunate and painful – but who choose another way than that of self-pity. These folk recognise self-pity for what it is and that is ultimately a way of self destruction. For this reason they do not give into it.

I can think of men and women and children who have chosen to be happy in every circumstance of their lives and have thus been strengthened to make their way through the most terrible of life experiences.

What Paul bids the Philippians do comes to mind: *Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice*. Again and again the apostle Paul bids his readers to be *glad in every circumstance* of their lives, knowing God is with them. In this the apostle echoes Jesus' own teaching in the Beatitudes.

Already in Old Testament times, one thinks of how Job – even in the midst of his deepest and most dire afflictions – found it in his heart to praise God and to say how happy he was. When things were at their lowest ebb and worst for Job, this sage thought less of the terrible ills befalling him in the here and now than he considered the many blessings he had received at other moments in time past... and which he knew would be renewed for him in time to come.

Likewise, St Benedict tells his monks to be happy even when confronted with the worst injustices in life. One thinks of Benedict's teaching on this subject in chapter 7 of our Rule which speaks of how the monk should react when he is subjected to unfair treatment.

The teaching of the Sacred Scriptures from beginning to the end of the Bible is that true happiness can be found in any situation in life if and when we recognise that God is with us always and that He is constantly at work in our lives.

No wonder then that the liturgy on this feast of St Benedict, whose Rule of life has for goal to help us live walking humbly with God, led us think of happiness from its very first moment in the Opening Chant *Gaudeamus*. It will end with an invitation for us to go forth from this place to share with all those we meet the joy of the gospel which we have been given to savour for ourselves.

Happiness is the word we have retained this morning. Of course, other words are also associated with the Benedictine way.

One other word is especially associated with St Benedict is peace. So much so, that it is seen as Benedictines' unofficial motto. When that word *Peace/Pax* is written in ornate form it is most often encircled by a crown of thorns, thus reminding us that we are not talking of some cheap, unreal peace, but again of a peace, like the happiness of which we have spoken, which is to be found in the midst of the ups and downs of life and even its turmoil.

Guided by the teaching of St Benedict in his Rule for Monks – a teaching which is founded upon the Sacred Scriptures – may all of us who look to Benedict today as an example and a guide, an inspiration and model for our lives, come to know that peace and happiness which this world cannot give... that peace and happiness which are beyond all human understanding; the peace and happiness which are found in God alone and in His Christ.

As one psalm puts it – and it is with this thought that I will leave you: *with the Lord, in the Lord, there is peace and fullness of joy, happiness that abides forever.*

Amen!