

All Saints (C)

(Apocalypse 7:2-4. 9-14 / Matthew 5:1-12)

01.11.2019

One word resonates throughout the gospel text we have just heard: **Happy!**

The word *happy* is also the first word of that most marvellous collection of prayers of God's Chosen People, Israel, found in our Bibles: the psalms. Psalm 1 opens with the word: *Happy!* The last book of Christian bible, the Apocalypse, ends on a note of happiness. It declares the happiness of those called to share in the Wedding Feast of the Lamb. The Book of Revelation describes the countless host of saints we celebrate today, all gathered together as one, holding their place around the Throne of Grace, singing God's praises, enjoying eternal happiness and unceasing blessing as they bask in the radiance of God's light.

Happiness is something we all long for. And rightly so. This is because *we were made for God*. Thomas Aquinas states in his famous *Summa: God is happiness in Himself*. To say that *we are made for God* is to declare that *we are made for happiness*.

The pursuit of happiness is a fundamental part of our human being and our Christian experience. To feel compelled to pursue happiness is a call we should not be afraid of; it is certainly not one we should shun.

Again it is Aquinas who teaches us: *Happiness is that perfect good which entirely satisfies one's desire*. He goes on to say: *God is the happiness that moves us, giving us the tendency or desire for happiness. God is happiness itself. We have been created by happiness itself for the purpose of happiness itself, because God enjoys making others happy*.

In the words of one spiritual writer: *The human heart is on a quest for happiness. Every person yearns for happiness like the desert yearns for rain. You have a desire for happiness. I have a desire for happiness. This desire is universal, common to every member of the human family. We simply desire to be happy and we act from this desire*.

As we heard from Aquinas, not only do *we* long for happiness for ourselves, but God wants us to be happy. This means that our desire for happiness rejoins the Lord's own deepest longing for us.

So many lines from the Sacred Scriptures come to mind which make the point that the Lord delights in and ardently desires our happiness. I won't try to quote them all. I will content myself today to echo just a few words of encouragement from the writings of the New Testament.

In Philippians 4 we read Paul's exhortation to the Church at Philippi: *I want you to be happy. Always be full of joy. I say it again, rejoice!*

In 1 Thessalonians 5 the Christians of the Church of Thessalonica are told: *Be happy always!* Peter takes up this same thought in his writings. Just like Paul, Peter doesn't shy away from telling his readers that happiness is to be found even in the difficult passages that are an inevitable part of every human existence. The apostle Peter rightly insists in his First Letter: *Happiness is found even in the challenging circumstances of life – through our endurance*. He encourages his readers to *rejoice and be happy in their trials*, daring to believe that their difficulties make them *partners with Christ*.

Those words of both Peter and Paul are a message we can hear addressed to us.

The last little phrase from Peter which I just quoted leads me to say this morning that one fundamental thing makes for happiness in our lives. It is what the apostle calls partnership with Christ.

We are called to *partnership with Christ* in every circumstance: in the ups and downs of our lives; in our joys and sorrows; in life's blessings and its challenges; in and through everything we traverse... remembering that we are meant to live everything with and for the Lord.

We have already seen, our longing for happiness actually corresponds to God's deepest desire for us. It is the Lord who first wants us to be happy. It is He who puts the yearning for happiness into our hearts.

Moreover, God sent His Son into the world to teach us how to be happy.

The way God would have us follow to bring us to true happiness is resumed for us in that body of teaching promulgated by Jesus in His *Sayings* which we call *the Beatitudes*. We can best understand the *Beatitudes* in terms of *be-attitudes*. Jesus explains to us through His teaching in these well-known *sayings* how to live our lives in a way that makes for happiness. In this basic Christian charter the Lord shows us how *to be*... how to be happy!

The Beatitudes make it very clear that happiness can never be an entirely selfish pursuit. Happiness is a gift we are called to share with others. The Beatitudes are not just about our happiness, but about others' happiness as well!

Happiness is meant to be lived in communion. True joy can only really be appreciated in real fellowship. It is striking that most often the Bible will say: *They are happy*. It is as if the Bible constantly draws to our attention and underlines for us that happiness is a community experience.

It is surely significant that today the Church has us celebrate all the saints gathered together in fellowship; it has us celebrate the communion of the saints who are gathered up into the happiness of the godhead itself.

The model for our communion and fellowship with each other is the Blessed Trinity.

According to the great theologian of the 12th century, Richard of St Victor: *The Blessed Trinity is itself love in essence*.

In the Trinity of Love which is God we see how love gives itself in each one of the persons of the Trinity to the other two, with whom it is one.

In the same way, those of us who strive to live in communion with God and with each other are called to give ourselves with and to each other in love.

This leads me to say that the Beatitudes announced by Jesus are not just sayings about human happiness, but happiness in the love of God, and therefore happiness in self donation. It is the nature of love to give itself. For this reason our God is One who gives Himself. Happiness and self-donation are equated because both meet in God's love. Again it is Aquinas who reminds us that *Our God is happiness... happiness who enjoys giving*. The *Angelic Doctor* speaks of *God giving Himself to make us happy*.

The Beatitudes show us how Jesus has told us specifically that the eternal blessedness for which we long comes from living according to the precepts He outlines for us therein. We would do well to listen to these *Sayings* again in the light of the call to blessed happiness which is addressed to each one of us personally today.

I thought it might help for me just to reiterate Jesus' words, using a modern day translation whose language renders the text, at one and the same time, more accessible and more challenging. It is to be hoped that we will allow ourselves to be disturbed, in a positive sense, in a good and healthy way, by Jesus' teaching heard here.

You're blessed when you hit rock bottom. Because then you can rely on God to go to work for you.

You're blessed when you mourn. That means you feel compassion and empathy for others. You begin to understand that we are all one.

You're blessed when you are humble and authentic. That is worth more than fleeting power and material possessions.

You're blessed when you hunger and thirst after spiritual things instead of worldly things. You will feel full instead of empty.

You're blessed when you express kindness. You will receive kindness in return.

You're blessed when you allow God's presence and goodness to fill your mind, heart and soul. Then you will see God in the outside world.

You are blessed if you live in peace and create peace. Then you will understand what it means to be a child of God. You are fulfilling God's dream for world peace.

You're blessed when people make fun of you or ridicule you for my sake. That means you struck a nerve. Well done! Many of my followers have experienced this. You are in good company.

You're blessed if you are persecuted because of your relationship with God. God knows and sees everything. God will reward you for your faithfulness.

I have emphasised this morning that real happiness is found only in communion. The happiness of the saints is found in their communion with the Lord and with each other. This thought of communion has us think of the call addressed to us as Christians to long for and work towards unity in Christ.

Saying that I find myself thinking of the importance of adding to Jesus' *Beatitudes*, found in chapter 5 of Matthew's gospel, one that Pope suggested we would do well to take to heart in our Christian Churches when he addressed those gathered in Sweden to celebrate the Year of Luther, around this time of the year, in 2016. He said there: *Blessed are those who pray and work for full communion between Christians*

That modern day Beatitude encourages us to live for the full communion of the saints, does it not?

As we celebrate *All Saints* we think of those holy men, women and children of *every race, tribe, tongue, people, nation...* and also every Christian denomination. We think of all these saints now caught up in the eternal dance of love of the Triune God, all one in Christ. This is what we are called to be already here on earth: *all one in Christ*.

I was struck to read a few simple, but profound, words pronounced by the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, just two weeks ago, when he preached at Westminster Cathedral during Ecumenical Vespers to honour and celebrate the memory of Saint John Henry Newman. In his sermon, the Archbishop was honest enough to mention painful things from history which have marred the lives of our respective Churches in the one family of God. He then went on to say: *For all that, we are still family, called together by grace, caught up in the love of God. The example of the saints, already living in glory, now completely gathered together as one in God's love, should be an impetus for us to engage ourselves courageously to an ever deeper ecumenical engagement, rooted in love.*

How it would rejoice God's heart to see us living according to His will: happily, one in Christ!
Ut Congregemur in unum. May all be gathered together into one.

Amen