

Midnight Mass, St Andrew's, Cobham

24 December 2017

Isaiah 62.6-end; Titus 3.4-7; Luke 2. 8-20

Happiness is for amateurs

There's something we say a lot at this time of year, and that's 'Happy Christmas'.

We think a lot about how to be happy, don't we?

Every now and then we see an article in a newspaper, or a new book comes out, that tells us how to be happy. And there is usually some good advice: things like simplify your life, exercise, help other people, be grateful – things like that. These are all good things, and worth the effort.

There was even an International Day of Happiness a couple of years ago, and in keeping with the day, the Independent published a list of what they claimed were the best jokes ever. I have my doubts, but here are a couple of them:

How many tickles does it take to make an octopus laugh? Ten tickles.

Two aerials met on a roof. They fell in love and got married. The ceremony wasn't great - but the reception was brilliant.

Why was the mortgage so upset? Because it was a loan.

Why was the horse so happy? Because he lived in a stable environment.

More groans than laughter, I suspect.

Happiness is a good thing, yes, and we should all work at being happy.

But happiness is strictly for amateurs.

I've decided that I'm going for something else. I'm going for the real deal. I'm going for the ultimate prize.

I'm going for joy.

Joy versus happiness. What's the difference?

Well, happiness is something that comes from outward things, such as a comfortable house and good friends, being liked and respected, a rewarding job

or a loving family. Perhaps even a good joke. But happiness is ephemeral. It comes and goes, often depending on our finances or our moods or even just the state of our digestion.

And God never actually promised us happiness. He never promised any of the things that make us happy, such as good health, or money, or protection from suffering.

But he did promise us something much greater.

He promised us joy.

[T]he angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people...” (Luke 2.10a).

Happiness comes from external things, but where does joy come from?

It comes from understanding just what the angel was announcing to the shepherds in the field that winter’s night 2,000 years ago.

It comes from understanding that with the birth of Jesus, God is showing us something – he is showing us that he is crazy in love with us.

Did you know that? Did you know that God is crazy in love with us?

So crazy that he left behind all his power and was born into this world a tiny baby, to live with us and show us what God is like – to show us that he loves us so much that he is willing to live with us, to suffer with us and finally to die for us on a cross, and through his life and death, to open up a way home for us – a way home, back to where we belong, in the loving arms of God, who sweeps us up and plants a kiss on our forehead and says welcome back! I have missed you so much! Now that you’re back with me, you will be with me always, and I will be with you. No height or depth can ever separate us again, in this life or in the next.

But wait, there’s more, as the adverts say. It gets even better.

It’s not just about us. God loves his *whole* creation, not just us humans, and he promises that one day, through the love and sacrifice of this little child born in Bethlehem, the entire world will be healed and re-made into a place where there is no more pain, no more death; a place where every tear is wiped away, and where God’s perfect love and justice rule. There will be a new heaven and a new earth.

Is this just crazy wishful thinking to get us through the dark night? Pie in the sky when you die stuff? Pollyanna on steroids?

No – we know it is true because that little child in the crib whose birth we are here to celebrate grew up to be a man, who was killed, but who was raised from the dead by God’s power and love, to show that the old order has fallen away, and God’s holy spirit has been poured out on us, and even now as we speak, is in the process of transforming everything, like yeast working through dough, like a tiny seed growing into a great tree.

Dear friends, this is joy. Simply seeing with our minds and accepting in our hearts that everything is in God’s hands. Seeing that, in the words of the great mystic Julien of Norwich, ‘all shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well.’

Will we suffer while we wait? Of course we will. Why should we be exempt from the brokenness of the world?

But here is the difference between happiness and joy: In the face of suffering, happiness always evaporates. But in the face of suffering, joy can grow stronger and deeper. By holding on to that picture of our God of crazy love, lying in that manger, and knowing that no matter how bad things get, nothing can wipe out his love and his promise to make all things right, we grow stronger and wiser and more peaceful.

‘[T]he angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people...”’ (Luke 2.10a).

That’s what I’m going for, this Christmas. Not happiness but joy. And it’s there for the taking – our crazy God offers himself freely in that crib, and I’m going to go with the angels and the shepherds and the wise men and I’m going to kneel down at that manger and accept God’s offer.

And friends, this evening I’m not going to wish you a happy Christmas. That’s for the minor leagues. Instead, I’m going to wish you a joyful Christmas, and a joyful year and a joyful life, and a joyful eternity.

And may God’s Holy Spirit, poured out on us through his beloved Son, Jesus Christ, born in that stable in an act of divine madness, be with us all, evermore.

Amen.