

The Pursuit of Happiness

Psalm 84

Phil.4: 4 - 7

Once upon a time, a big dog was watching a little dog chasing its tail, and questioned it “Why are you chasing your tail so?” Replied the puppy “I have mastered philosophy, I have solved the problems of the universe which no dog before me has rightly solved, I have learned that the best thing for a dog is happiness, and that happiness is my tail.

Therefore I am chasing it, and when I catch it I shall have happiness.”

Said the old dog “My child, I too have paid attention to the problems of the universe in my own weak way, and I also have formed some opinions.

I also have decided that happiness is a fine thing for a dog, and that happiness is my tail.

But I have noticed that when I chase it, it keeps running away from me, but when I go about my business, it comes after me”.

In the American Declaration of Independence of 1776 are written these words:”We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men (yes, it does specify men!) are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness....”

The pursuit of happiness... ?

Is happiness an ‘unalienable right’?

Is happiness something to be pursued, to be chased after?

We sometimes talk of it in those terms - following the blue bird of happiness, seeking after the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

But is that how we go after it?

Think of some popular beliefs about happiness.

Many forms of advertising, for example, link happiness with acquiring possessions - the way to be happy is to have more and better things.

Which seems to make greed and selfishness the by-products of achieving happiness.

However I suspect that in these recent weeks and months of dealing with the COVID epidemic, many of us may have come to a new realization about happiness.

Happiness is now being able to hug someone, gathering with friends for lunch, going to visit a loved one in a senior's residence.

The things we totally took for granted until they were no longer available.

The simple everyday doings of life which were suddenly forbidden and fraught with danger.

We discover that our ideas about what happiness involves may totally change with our situations and circumstances.

Psalm 84 which we listened to earlier has something meaningful to say about happiness.

“Happy are those who live in God's house, ever singing God's praise...

“Happy are those whose strength is in God, in whose hearts are the highways to Zion (or we could say, highways to God or towards God's ways)...

“O Lord of Hosts, happy is everyone who trusts in you...”

Let's reflect on the psalms in general for a moment.

The psalms of course are poetry, and the function of poetry is not primarily to explain, but to offer images which resonate with our lives.

One writer has said:”In season and out of season, generation after generation, faithful women and men have turned to the psalms as a most helpful resource for conversation with God about things that matter most”.

The Psalms, although thousands of years old, continue with authenticity to reflect the voice of our common humanity, about life as it truly is in its deepest dimensions of emotion - anger,

grief, pain, vengeance, but also elation and joy - they run the whole gamut of our human experiences.

They mingle pain and praise, lamentation and exultation.

They are not so much about God addressing us, but about us addressing God both in our anguished and in our joyous human journey.

There's a down to earth honesty to the psalms, because taken together they express all the complexities and contradictions of the human experience.

Psalm 84 could perhaps be considered one of the more hopeful and upbeat of the psalms.

The prefix states it is "according to the Gittith" which was a tune, and "of the Korahites" who were part of the group of temple singers.

So it was originally designed to be sung in worship, as were many of the psalms which were composed to be the prayers and hymns of the worshipping community of Israel.

But even a psalm such as this becomes essentially personal, demanding we read it also as individuals.

"My soul longs... my heart and my flesh sing for joy... I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God...."

And the touching reference that even the humble birds - the swallow and the sparrow - can find homes and nesting places in the temple of God.

The implication being of God's overarching protective presence.

Psalm 84 in its essence reflects one particular aspect of the human condition - that true, genuine happiness comes through our longing for transcendence, our searching desire for the holy, which can lead to a worshipful affirmation of God's faithfulness and goodness.

Parts of the psalm explore this understanding at a deeper level. Verses 5 and 6 - "Happy are those... who go through the valley of Baca... they make of it a place of springs."

Now the valley of Baca cannot be identified with any known place but the Hebrew word means 'to drip' and so has become associated with weeping, with shedding tears.

Another translation calls it "the Bitter valley" and the New English Bible says "as they pass through the thirsty valley they find water from a spring.. the Lord provides even (those) who lose their way with pools to quench their thirst".

If we want to be a little creative with this image, which is actually what poetry calls us to do, we can say that people who make God their strength, follow God's ways, even when they pass through valleys of sorrow, of tears and weeping, can know the assurance that God is supporting them, upholding and strengthening them.

As a minister, I don't know how often someone has said to me: "I never would have been able to cope with this particular grief or sorrow if I hadn't felt that God was with me, supporting and upholding and walking with me on the road".

Because they had chosen the right highway on which to set their feet, they could experience a happiness which came from trust and confidence in God's love and mercy, even in the midst of pain and tears.

It has been suggested that Psalm 84 was originally sung by pilgrims to Jerusalem as they entered the temple, and there is this whole image of journeying, of pilgrimage in parts of the psalm.

The New English Bible translates verse 5 as "Happy (are those) whose refuge is in thee, whose hearts are set on the pilgrim ways..."

This is a happiness which comes from an inner attitude, rather than something outside of us to be pursued.

The suggestion here is that happiness comes from walking a certain road, following a designated way.

A number of years ago the American psychiatrist Scott Peck wrote a very popular book called "The Road Less Travelled", a title he took from a line in a poem by Robert Frost.

And the theme of the book was about life choices, how we live our lives by the decisions which we make, for good or ill. And we can paraphrase those words in Psalm 84 as “Happy are those whose strength is in God, in whose hearts are the highways to God”
Implying that the right road is there for us to take, but we ourselves must chose where we walk.

The psalmist is very sure that true happiness comes from following God’s ways, from seeking to discern where are the highways to God, and from placing our feet on those roads.

Jesus always implied in his teaching that the invitation to God’s kingdom, to follow God’s ways, was open to everyone. But that walking the way of God demands more of us that simply casual wandering.

“Strive to enter through the narrow door” he said.

God’s way is a way which is most fully lived with discipline, with purpose, with meaning, with commitment, with faith.

It requires that life should be lived accountably and responsibly. It means making choices, decisions, commitments that truly affect the way we live out our lives.

And yet the psalmist assures us that this is the route to genuine happiness of soul.

“O Lord of hosts, happy is everyone who trusts in you”.

A happiness which is not something we pursue and chase after like the elusive blue bird.

A happiness which we do not regard as one of our “unalienable rights”, as something we deserve and therefore must have.

But an inner happiness, radiating outwards, which comes from trust in God, assurance that we are seeking to walk in God’s ways, confidence that in being the hands and feet of Jesus Christ we are doing what we can to carry out God’s will for our lives and for our world.

The apostle Paul sums up this source of happiness in his own way in those words to the church in Philippi which I read earlier and will read again:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your request be known to God. And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

And he goes on to add:

Finally beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise think about these things.... and the God of peace will be with you”

May our prayer for ourselves and for one another be that we might know the inner happiness which comes from the presence of the God of peace in our lives, and in our world.