JOY'S SILVER THREAD

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DEEP IN THE HEART OF EVERY PERSON THERE IS A LONGING FOR HAPPINESS. WE MAY SEEK IT THROUGH VARIOUS ROUTES AND UNDER MANY GUISES – AS OFTEN AS NOT ILLUSORY – BUT IT IS THE SAME GOAL. As Pascal noted, 'The reason why some go to war and some do not is the same desire in both, but interpreted in different ways … This is the motive of every act of every person, including those who go and hang themselves.'[1]

If that is so, we might suppose that everyone knows what happiness is. And yet that question remains strangely elusive, despite innumerable books on the subject. Many identify happiness with success, however that is defined. Often they come with step-by-step programmes for achieving this goal. Others have come to the conclusion that happiness has a spiritual dimension, that it has less to do with 'feeling happy' and more to do with who we really are, with our capacity to be at peace with ourselves, to be grateful for life, to feel some deeper connection to the transcendent.[2]

But even before we read any of these books our imagination of happiness has been shaped by a constant stream of cultural images. Every popular magazine article, whether it is about beauty secrets of the stars, meeting the perfect mate, or driving the right car, features an implicit advertisement for happiness. And that is not to mention all the explicit ads, the ones filled with people whose beatific expression promises, 'This way lies happiness' – if only we could have what they have, look more like them, be more like them.

What all these approaches have in common is a tendency to identify the pursuit of happiness in subjective terms. Happiness is ultimately a matter of *feeling* happy. But feelings are notoriously unstable, subject to a host of circumstances and influences beyond our control. What if happiness is not subjective, a question of how we feel, or a matter of chance, something that simply *happens*? What if it is more like an *objective* condition, something analogous to bodily health? Aristotle took this view. The word he used for happiness, *eudaimonia*, is not a matter of feelings but a way of *being*, a certain fullness of life. Happiness, for Aristotle, has to do with living in accordance with the rational and moral order of the universe. It is more like the *flourishing* of a healthy plant than like Freud's pleasure principle. Because it is rooted in habits of the soul, it is the fruit of considerable striving. But for the same reason it is not subject to the vagaries of fortune.

The Greek-writing authors of the New Testament did not use Aristotle's word for happiness. They drew on another word, *makarios*, which refers to the happiness of the gods in Elysium. In the Gospel of Matthew this is the word that Jesus uses to introduce his Sermon on the Mount: 'Happy are the poor in spirit … Happy are the meek … Happy are they who mourn …' (Mt 5.3–11). St Jerome, who prepared the Latin translation in the fourth century, used *beatus*, a word that combines the connotations of being happy and blessed. Hence, these verses are known as the beatitudes. Forced to choose, most English translators have opted – probably wisely – for the more familiar 'Blessed are …' The beatitudes, after all, are not about 'smiley faces' or feeling happy. They are not about feelings at all. They are about sharing in the life and spirit – the happiness – of God. In that spirit a disciple (like Jesus himself) could experience mourning, suffering, and loss while remaining 'blessed' – happy, that is, in the most fundamental sense.

It is surprising, in this light, that Christians are so reluctant to address this topic. Why? Perhaps the pursuit of happiness seems vain or self-centred. After all, the gospel is about salvation, not success, or 'feeling good'. On the other hand, many people (both Christian and non-Christian) associate Christianity with grim moralism and self-denial. The Christian tradition is the last place they would seek advice about happiness, and so they remain unaware that the theme of happiness runs like a silver thread throughout Christian tradition, especially in the wisdom of those holy men and women known as saints.

If this seems not simply unfamiliar but odd, many Christian hagiographers deserve a measure of blame. Traditional stories about saints emphasise their miraculous and otherworldly traits, while airbrushing out anything recognisably human.[3] Consequently, we may assume that Christianity has little relevance in answering the deepest yearnings of our hearts. But as we learn more about the saints we find that they pursued questions not unlike our own: What is the meaning and purpose of life? Why do so many of our hopes and plans end in sadness and disappointment? Where can we find true peace? How can we feel more truly alive?

It is here that the saints speak to our yearning for happiness because they steer us away from popular notions that happiness is either a matter of subjective feelings or a case of blind luck – something that simply 'happens'. The happiness of the saints is an objective

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condition: a certain habit of being or health of the soul, the 'life in abundance' to which Christ pointed the way. It was of such happiness that St Augustine wrote, 'Happiness is to rejoice in you and for you and because of you. This is true happiness and there is no other.'[4]

The opposite of happiness is not sorrow but deadness. Many of us know what that feels like: the dissatisfaction induced by a consumer culture that stimulates our senses and bombards us with largely meaningless choices, while leaving us starved for some deeper purpose. But this is not a new phenomenon. The desire to escape such deadness was one of the motives of the early desert fathers and mothers. They rejected a world whose agenda was defined by the pursuit of power, property and pleasure. They went into the desert to tap into the source of life and to discover their own true selves.

The story of such desert ascetics may appear harsh and off-putting to a contemporary audience. *The Life of Antony*, one of the earliest desert fathers, spares no detail of his ordeals in the wilderness – including hunger, sleeplessness and the peril of wild beasts. Yet when he reappeared from the desert everyone was struck not only by his physical health but by the 'soul's joy' that shone from his face: 'He was never troubled, his soul being calm, and he never looked gloomy, his mind being joyous.'[5] There is a fascinating chain that links such spiritual seekers. Having found the emptiness of what their culture defined as happiness, they sought another way.

The happiness they found did not consist of adding up mortifications and self-conscious exercises. But it did entail an effort to disengage from the easy flow of the world, some effort to take possession of their own souls. What surprises and attracts us in the best of the saints is not the heaviness of their burdens, but the 'soul's joy' that shines through their actions and attitudes. It is this quality that made them appear not simply admirable but deeply attractive.

The pursuit of happiness, often enough, begins with the initial thirst for a more authentic life, the impulse that led so many saints, from the ancient desert fathers to contemporary seekers, to rebel against the 'deadness' of their surrounding culture and its false rewards. This leads to lessons on letting go, on work, on sitting still and on learning to love – the final goal of all spiritual practice.

At this point the lessons grow harder. Learning to suffer addresses the most difficult and yet the most necessary theme in any 'guide to happiness,' and here the wisdom of the saints is especially telling. To judge by the popular literature, happiness is a matter of keeping as much distance as possible between ourselves and anything that hurts. But that is a strategy that only takes us so far. For the saints do not teach us how to avoid suffering. Nor do they teach us that suffering makes us happy. What they do show is that it is only along the path of holiness that we can comprehend a type of happiness for which suffering is no necessary obstacle. Through figures ranging from St Therèse, to Julian of Norwich, Teilhard de Chardin and Henri Nouwen, we learn that our attitude need not depend on outward circumstances. There is a meaning or truth at the heart of life which suffering is powerless to destroy. There is no place that is literally 'godforsaken', but in every situation there is a door that leads to love, to fullness of life, to happiness. This is the deepest mystery of the gospel. Our task, if we would learn from the saints, is to find that door and enter in.

The same applies to the subject of death. On the saint's path to happiness death is no longer an enemy or a fearsome end; learning to die, it appears, is an indispensable aspect of learning to live. Beyond this, there still remains a final lesson. For the saints do not regard death as the final chapter of the human story.

According to Christian tradition, we are created for a happiness greater than this life can contain. Rather than undermine the importance of everyday life, this ultimate goal gives value and meaning to all that goes before. Granted, some saints place so much emphasis on the perfect or 'ultimate' happiness of heaven as to render the idea of happiness in this life a relatively trivial pursuit. But those I favour have stressed the lines of continuity. As St Catherine of Siena liked to say, 'All the way to heaven is heaven.' We might call this the mysticism of everyday life – that habit of faith that trains us to see life in its ultimate dimension.[6]

All the way to heaven is heaven, if we have eyes to see. It is a way of lightness and balance, a way that awakens us to each moment. On this path we are never finished; we are only and always *on the way*. When we think of holiness in these terms – as a kind of direction, rather than a destination – we have a sense that what unites us with the saints, our fellow travellers, is much deeper than all that sets us apart. For all of us, it is our present situations and the given circumstances of our lives that provide our own road to holiness. All this is part of the way to God. That being so, it must be part of our own way to happiness. ■

NOTES

1. Blaise Pascal, 'Morality and Doctrine', in *Pensées* (trans. AJ Krailsheimer; New York: Penguin; 1966), p. 74.
2. The Dalai Lama has offered his own contribution to this genre with a bestselling book on *The Art of Happiness: A Handbook for Living* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1999).
3. On this basis we might share George Orwell's conclusion that the very aspiration to holiness is evidence of a warped personality: 'Saints', he once wrote, 'should always be judged guilty until they are proved innocent.' See 'Reflections on Gandhi', in *The Penguin Essays of George Orwell* (New York: Penguin, 1968), p. 465.
4. Augustine, Confessions Book X, quoted in G Wills, *Saint Augustine* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1999), p. 228.
5. Athanasius, *The Life of Antony* (trans. RC Gregg; New York: Paulist Press, 1980), p. 81.
6. It was this insight that struck Thomas Merton, in a famous moment, when he wrote, 'There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun...There are no strangers! ... The gate of heaven is everywhere.' See *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday/Image, 1968), p. 158.