



2nd Sunday after Christmas Biv
Excerpts From Ecclesiasticus 24, Ephesians 1 & John 1

Anchor

In the chaos and confusion of life, being a disciple of Jesus will keep us anchored in grace and truth
Fr David King – 3rd January 2021

You will benefit greatly from reading through the Gospel before reading this (John 1.1-18)

1. Gallup

I find the word 'happy' or 'happiness' a very intriguing and interesting one, and I thought it might be appropriate, at the beginning of this new year, to come back to that word, and to see what the Gospel can offer us in terms of happiness. And for a light-hearted start, let's begin here...

- Recently, I came across the 2020 World Happiness Report. This report was put together using data from the Gallup World Poll by a group of independent researchers, and was published by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network, which is under the United Nations umbrella.
- The Report, which was published at the beginning of 2020, was a landmark survey on the state of global happiness, and it ranked 153 countries by how happy their citizens perceived themselves to be. I wonder where you think the UK came in the ranking?
- Well, this was done over a three year average, 2017-2019 so it's pretty accurate and I can tell you that the UK did not feature in the top ten! The Scandinavian countries did very well indeed; Finland, Norway, Sweden and Denmark all featured in the top ten (Finland in fact was first). The UK was 13th and the USA was 18th. Which I suppose, out of 153 countries is not bad.
- Ok, so that's nations. Let's turn to jobs. I'm sure I've told you this before, but I've got to be able to gloat about something. But in 2010, the BBC did a poll about the level of happiness in different jobs, and do you know what the number one happiest job in the UK was? Yes, that's right, priests and vicars. It was the number one happiest job in the country! The interesting thing about that poll was that money had nothing to do with happiness.
- What's even more interesting is that in my house (sadly I couldn't find it to bring it over, but it's in there somewhere) I have a book called 'Why priests are happy'. This book was published in 2011 by Stephen Rossetti, who is a priest and psychologist in the USA, and in it there is the most fascinating graph...
- You'll have to imagine this now. Up the vertical axis was levels of happiness (from low to high), and along the horizontal axis was the number of hours a week that the priest spent in prayer (0,1,2,3,4,5 etc.). And yes, you guessed it, there was a direct correlation! The more time the priest spent in prayer, the happier he was.
 - Now, of course, you've got to be careful here. Correlation doesn't necessarily prove causation. So it could be that there was something else that was causing that, but even so it's very interesting isn't it? And I would hazard a guess that that is true for everyone of course, not just priests.

2. Gospel

- Happiness. It's hard to define isn't it, and yet I guess, somewhere inside, we all want to be happy. And of course there's nothing wrong at all with that desire. The Catechism of the Catholic Church says that God has placed that desire on our hearts. The trouble is that we get so utterly confused *as to the kind of things that will make us happy*. We're constantly looking in this direction and Jesus is saying 'no, look, it's over here...'
- The beautiful Gospel reading we've just heard is from the very beginning of John's Gospel, it's called The Prologue, and think of it as being like the overture at the beginning of an opera or a play. John is giving people an idea of what's coming, he's laying out his key themes and setting the mood and tone, he's giving people a taster of his writing and drawing them in, it's a brilliant piece of poetry and there so much in there, and it's such a brilliant way of kicking off his Gospel.
- And the first line 'In the beginning was the Word' is of course a deliberate echo of the first line of the whole bible, from the book of Genesis 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth'. All of his readers and listeners would have immediately known this. John is clearly saying something powerful here. He's saying that just as Genesis was about God acting in a new and exciting way, so this Gospel, this news about Jesus, is about God acting in a new and exciting way, creating and bringing about new things once again.
- But then he goes on, and again, it could not be clearer. Just as that first act of creation consisted of God filling the world with good things; trees and animals, the seas and mountains. So now again, the Father, through Jesus, is filling the world with good things, only this time...only this time...it is things like life, light, grace and truth, these are the things John mentions over and over again in this Prologue, these are the things that he came to bring, these are the things that can be found in him.

3. Grace

- Life is complicated. Relationships are complicated, decisions are complicated, and there are all kinds of challenges in the world. But in the midst of it all, John offers us, in his Gospel, Jesus. Not as a magic talisman that is going to zap away our suffering, but rather as an anchor to ground us in good things, things that we so desperately need, things like light, truth and grace. And isn't it these things that we really need? Isn't it these things that we really want? At the end of day.
- Again, I said this over Christmas, but if 2020 has taught us anything, it's that relying on things that we perceive to be stable, our comfy and secure lives for example, is folly, because it can, and will, all come crashing down in an instant. John is calling us to anchor ourselves in Jesus and to see the good things that are on offer through and in him. He's inviting us in to the rest of the story.
- And I totally believe all this *will* make a difference in our lives. In 2019, a study was done by the Pew Research Centre into the relationship between religion and happiness. And lo and behold they found that actively religious people are more like to describe themselves as 'very happy' than their non-religious contemporaries. They were also more likely to vote, and more likely to volunteer their time at a local charity project. So, as we begin this new year, let's listen to John and to what he's saying and let's remember that grace and truth are to be found in the name of Jesus.

Jesus, help me to remember that the happiness I seek, is to be found only in you.