

The Psalm set for today, Lent IV, as distinct from the Psalm 124 set for Mothering Sunday, has an interesting theme that underpins something that many in the world long for. And that longing is called *happiness*.

Let me read to you the first two verses of the psalm.

Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.  
Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

The quest for happiness is, for some, a life long pursuit. It is a term that we often use but is it one that we truly understand. What does it truly mean to be *happy*? What is *happy*? Content? Security? Lack of sadness? A state of being? Joy?

Well, for philosophers and theologians, it is a simple question that has occupied some of the greatest minds. It is hotly contested, yet highly desired. It is a pursuit that has led to epic adventures and generated much disagreement and hostility over the ages. What is this thing called *happy* and is it all worth it?

That first word of traditional introit, in Latin, gives us the formal name for today. *Laetare Jerusalem*: Be joyful, Jerusalem! is a literal translation from the Latin, but again, behind a single word is a nuance, a nature that cannot be easily defined or understood, but resonates with us.

śim·hū (שִׂמְחָה) Brighten up carelessly when approaching Jerusalem!

Spin around joyously if you have affection for the place!

Be bright and cheerful amongst all those who conspire against her!

I have wonderful images in my mind of Spinning Dervishes!

Brighten up! What a wonderful thought as around us, in the Lenten time and heaviness of grief and shock that we have seen. Brighten up! Bring light! Lift the contrast, if I may borrow a photographic term, to the shade, and expose the areas of darkness, and overshadow them not with pain or suffering, but love!

Many have remarked at the speech of Jacinda Adhern and the singing as people of many faiths and traditions joined in the with Muslim community of Christchurch in a day of prayer and national mourning. In exposing the darkness of violence, death and loss, light was shown with the greetings of peace and love.

She said, "...we are broken-hearted, but we are not broken. We are alive, we are together, we are determined to not let anyone divide us." Imam Gamal Fouda, who survived the terror attack at Al Noor Mosque, told mourners in Christchurch during his sermon that he "saw hatred and rage in the eyes of the terrorist."

In the eyes of thousands of New Zealanders and "human beings from around the globe," however, he saw "...love and compassion." (Morocco News 29/3/19)

As children of Abraham, part of the multitude of stars that number the great nations of the world, what has happened there is a story of reconciliation planted as seeds of hope in the blood of those who lost their lives, and the many who were injured. (Adhern).

St Paul, writing to the Corinthians is very clear this is our destiny and desire under Christ, of whom we are all ambassadors. All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.

...in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. (2 Cor 5.18-19)

The gatherings in Christchurch were more than the reconciling of hurt, but a statement of the great hope and desire that God has for us, even in the face of what challenges us, to be very much the children of Abraham: one great people all descended and worshipping God. And it was in the presence of such greatness of nations, creeds and traditions that music played an important part.

Yousef Islam sang (Cat Stevens for those old enough to recall). The call to prayer was broadcast, in song across the world. The New Zealand anthem: which own words echo the fact that Aotearoa is a nation of many creeds; and the song *How Great thou Art*. That greatness was there for all to see in the depth of humanity gathered in one place, individually and collectively showing the image of God granted in their creation for all the world to see.

Don't worry, be happy. How difficult can that be in the face of terror? Calling out the evil, shining light in the darkness, celebrating our common humanity: maybe, just maybe, there is hope for all of us as ambassadors of the word.

And what of today's gospel? Why not a sermon on the loving providence of God? Well, I think it is clearly shown in the dancing and strength of God's people in the light that is shining on a city scarred by natural disaster and violence.

The Parable of the Man with Two Sons is prefaced by the Pharisees objecting to Jesus eating with those considered outsiders. To be an outsider is to be *apart from God* in the eyes of the Pharisees, and thus, sinners. This would include the Samaritans, Ishmaelites (from whom Islam is descended from Abraham) and those who, well, were beneath the contempt of the elite religious.

Jesus responds to them with three stories. A lost coin is found and there is great celebration and dancing. A lost sheep is rescued, and heaven went into absolute joy. And a child is lost and comes home, and the father's joy is expressed in feasting and dancing. The message is one of clarity: Christ came to find those who were lost. This is at the heart of the Messianic mission.

I watched a taping of *Hard Quiz* recently. Nearly every show, Tom Gleeson will say at least once "you're dead to me." Effectively, that is what the young son said to his father and family. This is why the Father said, "my son whom I thought was dead has come back to life." The return of his son, even if the repentance started out somewhat from a mercenary point of view, led to spinning around joyously and exiting the darkness of despair.

The elder son, echoing the thoughts of the Pharisees saw this as an injustice, but what of the joy that was in the feast? What of the light and brightness that shone out of the transfigured face of the father? What is the better option – doom and gloom or celebrating and feasting?

The heavenly city is the place where we are called to be bright, to spin around gloriously and rejoice. Today, on Mothering Sunday, maybe that Heavenly City is truly our mother. From Abraham, all people look to that place, and pray for its peace. Friday, we all looked to another heavenly city, Christchurch, and saw how it is done.

During our prayers today, *How Great thou Art* will be played as a sign of solidarity of our prayers and the prayers for the peace of the world.

Simhu! As-salamu alaykum!

Brighten up! The Peace of God be with you.