

**18 July 2021**

**St George's Epsom**

**8.30am, 10.15am**

**The Pursuit of Happiness.**

Gal 2:20, Isaiah 35:8-10, Phil 4:4,8-12, Luke 9:57-62

### **Introduction**

Just before Christmas 2013, Pharrell Williams, the US singer and songwriter released a new song that went on to become a global phenomenon:

- reached no.1 in 24 countries including NZ, USA, Australia and the UK
- the 8<sup>th</sup> highest selling single of all time
- the most downloaded song of all time in the UK
- Nominated for best original song at the Oscars – it lost to 'Let it go' from Frozen!
- In NZ it broke the record for most weeks at no 1 – 15 weeks, breaking the record previously held by Bonny M's Rivers of Babylon.

You'll know it as soon as you hear it – 'Happy' - the kind of song that fully lives up to its title – hearing it makes you happy and glad to be alive.

*“Clap along if you feel like a room without a roof. (very appropriate for St George's)  
Clap along if you feel like happiness is truth  
Clap along if you know what happiness is to you  
Clap along if you feel like that's what you want to do”*

The song perfectly captured the spirit of our times – after all who does not want to be happy, fulfilled, the best version of themselves, in love with life itself? It championed the pursuit of all those things that make us happy – our work, our relationships, our free time, our hobbies, even our religion.

Today - in these uncertain COVID times, with rising anxiety and mental unwellness, the song reminds us of a more innocent age, so much so that when we hear it, it stirs a wistfulness in us, not unlike that experienced when we stumble across a carefree family summer photo in the midst of a long winter.

But it hasn't always been like this. There was a time when happiness was not our number one pursuit. It was in competition with other idols for our allegiance and loyalty. The idols of security, good health, professional and material success competed for our attention. But sometime in the past 10 – 15 years, it became socially acceptable that the greatest aspiration we can have for our children is simply “that they are happy”. All idols bow down to someone or something and it seems we now all pay homage to the idol of happiness.

And the church is not immune to this idolatry. Increasingly we consume church rather than commit to being the bride and body of Christ. We are happy to come along unless we are busy that Sunday, or we feel our spiritual needs are no longer being met, in which case we

simply go looking for a better church. Just as there are fashions in art and clothing, there are fashions in theology. One of the many casualties of our myopic focus on happiness is the loss of a rich theology of servanthood, justice, sacrifice and obedience. The implication being that these things, although worthy will not make us as happy as pursuing happiness itself. Thus, the previously rich theology of human flourishing and shalom has morphed into a narcissistic like impulse – human flourishing is now all about my sense of wellbeing, my sense of giftedness, my sense of truth, my sense of self expression. And so we worship God because of the happiness he brings us.

You see this is the thing with idols. They are like the badly tuned sports car, the red eye in the photo, the black spot on an apple - they are almost good enough but not quite right. It's not that they are wrong, but that they are distortion, they serve to draw us away from God, away from the light and away from the world. Like a pixelated image, the devil distorts, and I am sure he rubs his hands with glee when he looks out upon the Christian world's fixation with happiness. As the senior devil says to the junior devil in CS Lewis' *Screwtape Letters*:

*“Indeed the safest road to hell is the gradual one – the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts”*

It is against these things, even the pursuit of happiness, that we must guard our hearts.

But here's the thing who does not want to be happy? Who does not want to feel like a house without a roof? (except maybe when it's a wet weekend and the roof is full of asbestos!) Who has not been seduced into the pursuit of the idol of happiness itself.

Well, I for one, plead guilty as charged. So let me tell you my recent 'biffo' with God.

Following my departure from World Vision I spent four long years in an arm wrestle with God. Like Jonah I was happy to serve the Lord but I wanted to dictate the terms:

- I wanted to go back to far off romantic and exciting Tarshish, whereas my destination was ultimately to be Ninevah - far less appealing and much closer to home
- I was thinking global, he needed me to think local
- I was thinking big, he was thinking small
- I was thinking platform, he was thinking service
- So seven times I set out for the equivalent of my Tarshish, in pursuit of that new role which would fully draw on my experience, my giftings and if I am honest make me happy again
- I got very close each time, even standing on the shores a couple of time, only to be swept back out to sea, shipwrecked and washed up on the shores of neighbouring Ninevah

You see like Jonah I was happy to serve the Lord, provided I could decide the destination and secure a degree of comfort, security and significance along the way.

Seven times shipwrecked leaves you wondering if maybe next time I might just catch a plane! So what am I learning, in this tussle with God. (I hasten to add this is still very much a work in progress):

**a) Our primary call is to faithfulness not to happiness**

Our verse for today, is from a letter written by Paul to the fledgling church in Galatia. It says all that need be said “For it is no longer I that liveth but Christ who lives in me”

Our choice to be a follower of Christ means we surrender sovereignty of our lives over to the Lord. It is no longer my will be done but yours be done. We are called to a life of faithfulness. If significance, material success and indeed happiness accompanies that call, well that is a blessing, but it is not a right. Instead we are called to a life of abandonment where we say to the Lord – **wherever** you call I will follow, **whenever** you call I will respond, **whatever** you call me to, it will be an honour to obey and **whoever** you call me to serve, I will give them my all. It’s a radical discipleship which demands our all and will never bow down to the idol of the pursuit of happiness.

Our gospel reading captures the essence of this radical discipleship and life of giving away that we are all called to.

Luke tells us that shortly after Jesus ‘turned his face towards Jerusalem’ he is mobbed by a crowd. One man calls out enthusiastically and spontaneously – “I will follow you wherever you will go.” Jesus responds: “Foxes have holes, the birds of the air have nests, but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head”. Like Abraham, like Joseph, like John the Baptist, like Jesus himself - are you willing to go without the comforts, the security and rich relationships of home to follow Christ wherever he calls. Instead we are called to bloom wherever God chooses to place us.

Jesus calls out to a second man to come follow him and seemingly, not unreasonably, the man says, “but first let me go and bury my Father” to which Jesus responds seemingly harshly “Let the dead bury their own dead – but as for you go and proclaim the gospel”. The significance of the ancient phrase ‘let me first go and bury my father’ is lost on our modern ears. The father was very much alive, he was not at death’s door. What in fact the man was saying was once I have fully discharged my family responsibilities and once my parents have died then I will be free to follow you. Conditionality has no place in our walk with God.

Yet again Jesus calls out to another man to come follow me. And the man says, “I will follow you but first let me say farewell to those at home”. And Jesus responds, “No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” Now you’ll be sensing a trap here. All is not what it seems and indeed that is so. In saying “let me say farewell to those at home”, what the man was really saying was “Let me seek the permission of those at home and if they grant it then I will follow.” Only those of us who have wrestled with the question of leaving home to pursue the calling of Christ know the agony of this call.

So often in my Christian walk I seek to define the terms, to preserve my autonomy and privilege. I will serve you Lord wherever, whatever, whenever, and whoever provided it also makes me happy and I will expect your blessing. Rather like the songs we sing with such abandon, we hope the Lord will never call us on our words. Awkwardly, painfully, I have learnt that sometimes the Lord does. He pays little attention to our happiness or indeed our comfort. He requires our service. He requires our obedience. He requires our faithfulness and sometimes like Peter we will be called to places we do not want to go.

## **Contentment**

The second lesson I am slowly learning is to be content in all circumstances. You see contentment has little to do with happiness. In our New Testament reading today Paul is writing to the church in Philippi and in his conclusion he writes "I am learning to be content in all circumstances." The implication being that contentment is not a natural state that it something that is learned and stands above personal happiness and fulfilment.

*"I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need"*

Paul found himself in some deeply unhappy places – he was shipwrecked, flogged, chased out of town, bullied, whipped and spent his last days in a Roman prison – and yet he was able to say I am learning to be content in all situations.

Temperamentally I live in the future, dreaming of possibilities and creating plans. It's the posture of the dreamer. But it casts a long and at times ridiculous shadow. I spend much of my year dreaming of when we will get back to our little place by the beach in New Zealand's Golden Bay. Yet no sooner than I have arrived and I am starting to think and plan for the year ahead. Future dreams often rob us of the ability to live in the present – "alienating us from the beautiful human beings we live with right now"

I am slowly learning, to quote Mike Riddell in his wonderful book Sacred Journeys, that in my desperation to lay hold of the future, it does little except to devalue the present. Rather than being fully present in every situation, rather than being alert to all that is around me, I have this innate tendency to want to flee encounter and instead explore any other territory except the one I am in. Thus I retreat from the fullness of the experience in favour of phantoms.

By retreating from the moment, to quote Mike Riddell once again, I impoverish myself, my own worst enemy by anaesthetising any possibility of a spiritual life."

Slowly, and with many a relapse, I am learning to be content in all situations. In my case I suspect it will be a perennial battle – nonetheless I am discovering there is a deep and very real contentment in serving the Lord wherever, whatever, whenever and to whoever he calls. I still hope to visit Tarshish once again, just as Paul himself wrote of his longing to visit Tarshish. He never got to realise that dream.

## Rejoice Always (Philippian 4:4)

The third lesson I am learning in my arm wrestle with God is that joy and happiness are not synonyms. They are as unlike as a potato is from a flowerpot:

- Whereas happiness is temporal, it come and it goes and is largely reliant on external circumstances, joy is found in relationships and ultimately in deep relationship with God.
- Whereas happiness has nothing to say to pain, except to hope that it is transitory, joy understands that even in pain God is close, he is at work, he is redeeming and he is there walking every step of the way with us;
- When we believe there is more pleasure to be had in something other than God, our obedience and service will never rise higher than duty. Our prayers will be small, our offerings inadequate and our dreams will never rise beyond the ceiling of our own tiny bedrooms.

Ultimately the pursuit of happiness places us at the centre of own puny stories. We are the lead actors in our own situation comedy, if only it was not so sad.

Whereas joy acknowledges we are part of something much, much bigger. Something that the stars sing of it and the trees clap their hands in anticipation of. It is the return of the Messiah when as Isaiah writes:

*where one day the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come with singing in their hearts. Everlasting joy will be on their heads and they shall obtain joy and gladness and sorrow and sighing will flee away.*

At best perhaps we are grace notes in this melody that stretches back before time and will be accomplished long after we have left the stage. And there is a liberation in this – a recognition that we are a part of something, much much bigger than ourselves and much much bigger than any of our dreams can contain. This joy and liberation enables us to bloom wherever God places us. It enables us to abandon all to follow Christ's call whenever he calls. It enables us to serve with humility and loving hearts whoever God calls us to serve and it enables to set outside our own feeble ambitions wherever God calls us to go.

Slowly I am learning that my deepest desire is not for a happy life, nor is it for relief from life's troubles, but rather it is for an encounter with God, to know that one day I will be greeted with those words "Well done Good and faithful servant"

That as CS Lewis says – "Joy is the serious business of heaven"

## **Readings for 18<sup>th</sup> July 2021**

**Theme: 'Guarding our Hearts'**

### **Verse for the Day: Galatians 2:20**

*"It is no longer I that liveth but Christ that lives in me."*

### **Old Testament Reading: Isaiah 35:8-10**

A highway shall be there,  
and it shall be called the Holy Way;  
the unclean shall not travel on it,  
but it shall be for God's people;  
no traveller, not even fools, shall go astray.  
No lion shall be there,  
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;  
they shall not be found there,  
but the redeemed shall walk there.  
And the ransomed of the LORD shall return,  
and come to Zion with singing;  
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;  
they shall obtain joy and gladness,  
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

### **New Testament Reading: Philippians 4:8-12**

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, 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. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

### **Acknowledgment of the Philippians' Gift**

I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need.

**Hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church**

**Thanks be to God**

**Gospel Reading: Luke 9:57-62**

**Praise and glory to God.**

**Would-Be Followers of Jesus**

As they were going along the road, someone said to him, 'I will follow you wherever you go.' And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.' To another he said, 'Follow me.' But he said, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.' But Jesus said to him, 'Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.' Another said, 'I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.' Jesus said to him, 'No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.'

**This is the Gospel of Christ.**

**Praise to Christ the Word.**