

How do we find the way to true happiness? In order to find an answer to this question, I did what any self-respecting theologian would do when preparing a sermon – I bought a Cosmopolitan. Found an article about an Englishman living in California called Peter Crone, who claimed to have an answer to the search for happiness. He calls himself a ‘happiness coach’ and his answer is: Book three sessions with me for 5000 dollars and you’ll know what happiness is. Don’t misunderstand me – I’m not jealous. Lives in California, Nicole Kidman as client, 5000 dollars..... What am I doing wrong?

The little bit of jealousy soon disappears when I start reading his advice about happiness. I will spare you from hearing all seven rules:

Have the courage to show all your feelings

Be your own best version

Realise that there is nothing wrong with you. (99% of people think there is something wrong with them)

I’m not sure what you think about that, but occasionally I’ve met one of the one percent who thought they were 100% OK, and I was extremely glad it was only a short encounter – they were not exactly pleasant to be with.

In any bookshop we find hundreds of titles telling us how to be happy. Go into the Tao bookshop on Lister Meile, you can browse for hours and be none the wiser at the end. Not that they just contain rubbish. There’s quite a lot of wisdom in them and many are entertaining to read. But most of it is to do with positive thinking in one form or another. Take ‘10 secrets of happiness’ by Adam Jackson. It contains lots of good ideas, but what do I read on the back cover? The author lives near San Francisco. Do you have to live in California to be happy? Are there books on happiness by or for people living near Bagdad or Kabul, Bielefeld or Castrop-Rauxel?

Seines eigenen Glückes Schmied

These books of wise advice are actually nothing new. They have a long history which stretches back into OT times. Think of the Book of Proverbs, for example.

- A cheerful heart is a good medicine, but a downcast spirit dries up the bones.

A lot of what we read here is not much different from the positive thinking of self-help literature. There are certain things we can do to make ourselves more happy – think differently, live differently (eat healthily, do more sport). We often associate this way of thinking with the USA, but it’s interesting that Germany has the proverb that sums it up: “Jeder ist seines eigenen Glückes Schmied.” Everyone is responsible for his/her own happiness. There’s a certain amount of truth in that, most of us would agree, whether we call ourselves Christians or not. I don’t wish to add any more tips in this sermon.

Part of a larger context

Before I move on to Jesus’ answer to happiness in our Bible text, I would briefly like to mention a further answer in the OT: My happiness depends upon whether I see myself as part of a larger context. The fear of the Lord is not just the beginning of wisdom, but a source of joy. Or perhaps the oldest of the 10 secrets of happiness, the ten commandments, begin not with us but with ‘I am the Lord your God’. In other words, happiness has something to do with knowing there is a power greater than me, a power I can trust.

We had a dog for many years who seemed to be happy; he knew he was part of a larger context. He had no worries about whether dog food was cheaper at Lidl or Aldi, or about the state of my bank-account. But imagine if he had wanted to go independent, he wouldn’t have lasted long. On a human level, this is what the prodigal son did in the New Testament parable. He cut himself off from the broader context of father and home, went independent and landed up with pigs. When I think about it, isn’t this what is happening to our economic and banking system? People who saw themselves responsible to nobody but themselves are now beginning to discover where that path ends. To put it another way: it’s good to know I don’t have to control everything or carry responsibility for everything alone – there is someone there I can trust, who has the whole world in his hands.

This too is not a uniquely Christian answer to the question of happiness. A Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist would probably agree. The Greek philosopher Epictetus would also agree: “There is only one way to happiness and that is to stop worrying about things that are beyond my sphere of influence.” But is there a way to happiness which is specifically and uniquely Christian?

Blessed are...

Perhaps the people who went to listen to Jesus 2000 years ago had a similar question in their heads. They didn't come from San Francisco but from the area around Galilee and generally speaking we can assume they were not happy. Their land was occupied by Romans, they paid heavy taxes, were extremely poor, and many were physically or mentally ill. The reputation of Jesus had spread and there would have been great interest in the content of this, his first official sermon. This was added to by the fact that he was preaching on the side of a mountain, which was reminiscent of Moses who received the 10 secrets of happiness from God on the mountain top. What would Jesus have to say about happiness? Can he overcome the forces that make us unhappy, release us from Roman occupation, give us food, or heal us from our illnesses? How does his sermon begin?

- Blessed are the poor for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- Blessed are those who suffer or mourn, for they shall be comforted.

I wonder how many of his listeners actually understood what he was saying. With their high expectations perhaps they were deaf to the essence of his message. “Blessed are the poor.” I am not going to take your poverty away and replace it with wealth. “Blessed are those who suffer or mourn.” Yes, a very small minority of you I can heal, but for the rest: I'm not taking your suffering away and replacing it with health. What then? I'm saying that in your poverty and in your suffering I am there with you and that is blessed. It's not a superficial feeling of happiness, but blessed, trusting and joyful on a much deeper level.

Sometimes people today have similar false expectations of what Christianity means. They are disappointed when God doesn't answer

their prayers by making their problems (or at least part of them) disappear.

They don't realise that there is something in his words that speaks to us at a deeper level. This is very different from a lot of esoteric self-help literature, that doesn't seem to take our suffering seriously or even implies that it's our own fault. It's the message of Matthew's Gospel from beginning to end. I'm not the God in heaven who waves his magic wand; I am the God who is with you, right there in the midst of things where it really hurts. Chapter 1: His name will be called Immanuel, God with us. Or at the end of the Gospel (last verse): "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world."

Invitation to silent meditation

If you hear this answer to happiness on a purely cognitive level it might sound a bit lame. There's a big build-up and what is the Christian answer – God is with me? I believe that in my head, but does it make a difference? I think it does if you take it down to the level where you feel poor, where you are suffering or mourning. I'd like to use the last two or three minutes of this sermon to invite you to do that. It's an exercise I do with seminar groups on spirituality, and it's something Christians have done for centuries. Close your eyes and become more aware of fact that it is not just heads that are sitting here, but people with hearts and feelings; that we are sitting here with bodies that often know a lot more than our head does.

Then take the word 'poor' from the text or 'mourning' or 'suffering' and see if this word produces some kind of resonance or reaction on a feeling level somewhere in your body. Perhaps in the area of the chest or heart, there is something that feels emotionally poor or suffering. Or perhaps deeper down towards the middle of the body – something that feels poor in energy or health. And instead of trying to wish it or explain it away, just stay with the feeling for a moment or two.

And then take this old-fashioned word 'blessed' down to the place you're feeling poor or hurt – and instead of using it to remove the hurt, try holding it next to the place, as though Jesus is speaking these words to you in the way you feel today. I'll stop talking for a while so that you can be there in silence.

The uniquely Christian answer to happiness..

.. is not an answer purely for the head, but an answer that comes to the places we most need it. This is the meaning of the word incarnation: The word that becomes flesh, in Jesus, in his life, death and resurrection and the word that speaks to us in our own particular need today: Blessed means you are not alone, I am with you.