

You have a duty to be happy...

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. But when I have the honour and pleasure of preaching for the Company, I almost make an innocent slip-up and start with "In the name of the Master, the Clerk and the Whole of the Court". But at least this gives me chance to say, Welcome again to this happy occasion in your lovely parish church. And it is a happy occasion. So I want to talk for a few minutes about happiness.

You have so much to be happy about. The Company has enjoyed another successful year and made great progress. You have a settled and superb team of men in the Clerk, his Deputy and the Beadle. God has spared you to come to this beautiful place, hear the matchless words of the traditional prayers and some of the most affecting music you could hear anywhere. In a few minutes you will be troubled to traverse the vast distance to Cutlers' Hall where someone will bid you a hearty welcome and thrust a drink into your paw. And over tasty food, lovingly prepared, you will enjoy your usual blend of scintillating conversation and friendship.

Now there's quite a lot to be thankful about. It's England and high summer. Ascot, Wimbledon and strawberries. Soon the Promenade Concerts will begin their celebration of Mozart. As the second lesson reminded us, "Rejoice!" There are always those who actually don't like happiness, they don't like being happy. Well, for them God has provided football.

But what is happiness? I was brought up in Leeds, so I am an expert on misery. It's not the place. Leeds is a fine place with the town hall symphony concerts, the beautiful parish church and the Yorkshire Dales on the doorstep. No, nothing wrong with the place: it's the temperament. Leeds people are people for whom jokes are no laughing matter. You take a Leeds bloke out for a slap up meal, Champagne and a variety show with a conjurer, a smutty comedian and two tassle-dancers. You ring him up next morning and ask if he enjoyed it. And he's say, "Aye, it were all reet. It weren't bad".

Happiness in fact has to be learnt. It has to be practised. This is true but it goes right against what people usually think. They think happiness is a mood and you can't help your mood. Because – and you will hear people say it – "I can't help the way I feel" Completely wrong. Look you can't help prevent earthquakes or make Tony Blair and Gordon Brown love each other – or even make the Central Line run efficiently. But your feelings – they are the one thing you can help.

Your practical religion, your spirituality and your personal psychological makeup are things you have to work at. St Augustine says you have to identify the frame of mind, the state of your soul, you desire and then work at it. In fact he uses the Greek word "hupocrites" – the word for an actor. It comes down to us as "hypocrite". You have to train your feelings by pretending until they behave as you want them to behave. Why are we so shocked when we hear this? It's the same with anything you want to improve – your cooking, your piano-playing or your golf-swing. Practice. You are responsible for the development of your own soul, for the sort of person you turn out to be.

Well of course we find it offensive when we're told we must educate our moods and feelings because really we like to indulge them instead. What St Augustine means in modern jargon is that we must learn to become emotionally house-trained. The old word is "mature". The in yer face way of expressing this is to say "Grow up!"

The Bible goes a lot further and tells us we have a duty to be happy? Why? Because the world that God has made – the world we live in – is good. And God's purposes for us are good. God is not your public school martinet or disciplinarian or drill sergeant. He does not want to make your life a misery in the supposed interests of some higher calling. The Sermon on the Mount begins with all those sayings about who are blest – and the word Our Lord uses for blest – "makarios" – means happy.

In that great sermon, Jesus even gives us practical hints, a DIY of salvation. In effect he says: "Look if you want to be happy, be thankful for your life – for the fact you're here at all. And have the imagination to understand that the other bloke has feelings like you as well. Try to enter that other bloke's feelings and see the world from his perspective. That's called loving your neighbour. Don't be always reckoning up who's done you a bad turn and play tit for tat. Let it go. Remember your destiny is life with God – so while the things of this world are good – and I'm the guy who turned water into wine and fed the 5000 remember – while the things of this life are surely good, remember your aim should be to learn to desire God, to love him and serve him. In short, don't be a prat all your life – have a day off. You'll feel better for it."

Of course some folk don't want to be happy – not truly happy, not really, not deep down. They're only happy when they're miserable. Unfortunately, that usually entails making other folk miserable too. You know the type: give 'em cold wet weather and they grumble; let the sun come out and it's too hot; and they were given the wrong seats at that dinner or broccoli when they asked for sprouts; and they pull such a tragic face about it, you'd think they'd just crawled out from under the Lisbon earthquake. And there are the screwed up sorts who sit and say nothing and sulk until they can find something to complain about. Verily they have their reward. And they're not happy.

People try to achieve happiness in all sorts of ways except by the one sure method. As the American Constitution has it, "Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness". The one certain way to miss happiness is to pursue it. For happiness is a by-product of something else. It is the bonus, the blessing, you get when you stop thinking about yourself and your interests. Happiness is the by-product of seeking to desire God – fervently. You want to be happy? You cain't get no satisfaction? Jesus tells you how to do it: "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God, and all these things will be added unto you".

Let me remind us all of those superb words at the end of the first lesson: "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter. Fear God and keep his commandments. For this is the whole duty of man"