

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

The right to happiness

Presented by Margaret Hall

More than two hundred years ago, the American Declaration of Independence stated that one of the inalienable rights of humankind is the pursuit of happiness. I once heard a comment on those words that sticks in my mind - that since they were penned there's been a shift in what they mean - that for the founding fathers the pursuit of happiness was not so much about an individual's right to feel good about themselves. It was more about a state of well-being in society as a whole - a kind of common good.

Since the Declaration didn't define what was meant by the pursuit of happiness, it's not surprising there's been a shift in its meaning. The idea of personal happiness has great appeal, and fits well in a society like ours, that places so much emphasis on the individual.

It's perfectly natural to want to be happy. And isn't it what every parent longs and prays for their children and grandchildren - that they will above all be happy?

I

The idea we have a right to pursue happiness is certainly attractive, but is it really helpful? In view of the way the world actually is, such a goal can lead to unrealistic expectations. It might be pleasant to think life should be like the set of *The Brady Bunch*, with perfectly groomed people interacting lovingly, in a home kept spotless by the efficient housemaid with her wonderful sense of humour, but the reality of our cluttered lives and complicated relationships is very different. It's a fact that in a broken world there's always sadness as well as happiness. Sadness is the inevitable consequence of the disorder which resulted from the breakdown of trust in God. At one level or another it touches everyone. The author Helen Garner writes feelingly about being stupid with sadness, by which I understand her to mean that sadness can weigh in on us, to the point where we lose the ability to think.

We live in a world of broken relationships and missed opportunities, of road accidents and cancers and dementias, where the goal of permanent personal well-being and prosperity is not realistic. When we're tempted to reduce what's good, to what's good for us personally, we come to fit David Wells' description of post-modern people, in his book "God in the Wasteland" - "shifting, aching beings, whose vision of salvation has dwindled to nothing more than the hope of a sense of well-being."

An imagined right to happiness may actually work against us. Accepting sadness as part of life is important for our peace of mind - something that's very much under threat. The World Health Organization predicts that by the year 2020, depression will be the world's second largest killer after heart disease. Some part of this epidemic could be down to the idea that happiness is our right. If we think that for us everything always has to be perfect, it's harder to cope when it's not.

But according to Jesus, personal well-being is not what constitutes happiness. He said real happiness, belongs to those who recognise their spiritual need, those who mourn, who *don't* put themselves forward, who long for what's right, the merciful and the pure in heart, the peacemakers and those who are persecuted for doing what's right. His criteria for happiness are radically different from ours, but given the way the world actually is, they bring us great comfort.

Why the meek, those who mourn, who know they're spiritually poor, are blessed, is all to do with what Jesus came for - to take on the powers of evil and death and defeat them. In the light of his victory, such people accept his rule, those who mourn are comforted, those who aren't pushy will have everything, those who hunger for what's right will have that hunger satisfied. The peacemakers will be his honoured children. Those who show mercy will receive it, and the pure in heart will see God.

II

The good news is that the inner joy, which Jesus gives to everyone who turns to him, can raise us above life's sadness. He said to his disciples, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again. You will rejoice and no one will take away your joy."

Jesus' resurrection and the joy it brought his disciples certainly didn't make them happy in the sense that from then on they had comfortable, pain-free lives. Things actually became far more difficult for them. In a very short space of time they were being persecuted for talking about Jesus. They were hauled before the authorities and flogged. But even that experience became a source of joy. We read that they left the Council of Elders rejoicing because they'd been counted worthy to suffer disgrace for the sake of Jesus' name.

Some years later, Paul wrote, "We do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all."

I'm not sure 'light and momentary' is the way I'd describe the troubles Paul went through. But that's how he saw them, when he compared them with the eternal glory he knew was ahead of him. In that perfect joy our present sadness, if we remember it at all, will be seen as we can't see it now - short-lived.

Dr R.A. Torrey was one of the great Bible teachers of a past generation. He and Mrs Torrey went through a time of great heartache when their twelve-year-old daughter was accidentally killed. The funeral was held on a gloomy, miserable, rainy day. They stood around the grave and watched as the body of their little girl was put away. As they left the graveside, Mrs Torrey said, "I'm so glad Elisabeth is with the Lord, and not in that box."

But even knowing this to be true, their hearts were broken. Dr Torrey said that the next day, as he was walking down the street, the whole thing broke anew - the loneliness of the years ahead without her presence, the heartbreak of an empty house, and all the other implications of her death. He was so burdened by this that he uttered a heart-felt plea to God for help. "And right then," he said, "the Holy Spirit I had in my heart broke forth with such power as I think I'd never experienced before. It was the most joyful moment I have ever known! It is an unspeakably glorious thing to have your joy, not in things about you, but within you - a fountain springing up, springing up, always springing up, under all circumstances."

III

The sadness that weighs in on us now will be lighter than the lightest feather compared to the weight of glory God has for us, but in the meantime, how do we bear it?

As our fellow human being Jesus knows the weight of sadness. He wept as he stood at the tomb where his friend Lazarus had been buried. He wept when he looked across at the city of Jerusalem, knowing how it would be destroyed, along with a great many of its people. In the Garden of Gethsemane, preparing for crucifixion, he said to Peter and James and John, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death." He understands our sadness.

Jesus also knows that trusting and obeying God is the path to peace. “Come to me,” he said, “all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” The yoke he put across his shoulders, was that of trusting and obeying his Father. His burden was to do God’s will, even if it meant dying on a cross. He could call such a burden light, only because his whole will was to please his Father - because *as* God the Son, he loves, and is loved by, the Father, perfectly and eternally.

Joseph was a man so successful in his middle years we forget how sad his youth was. Sold into slavery by his older brothers, then falsely accused by his new master’s wife, he spent his twenties in prison. Even after Pharaoh had raised him to the prime ministership, surely a sadness remained, over the way he’d been treated and the long years of separation from his father and younger brother. When his older brothers turned up in Egypt to buy grain he recognised them immediately, though they didn’t recognise him. He supplied their needs but warned them not to come back for more unless they brought their younger brother with them. When they finally appeared with Benjamin, Joseph was completely overcome. We read that he left the room in a hurry, to weep in private. Perhaps seeing Benjamin so changed from the boy he remembered brought to the surface the hurt of many years. We read that when Joseph finally made himself known to his brothers, he wept so loudly Pharaoh’s whole household heard it.

How did Joseph come safely through all the sadness of his youth? He revealed his dependence on God, and his desire to honour him, in the things he said - like when he said to Potiphar’s wife as she tempted him into adultery, “How can I do this thing and sin against God?” When he interpreted the dreams of his fellow-prisoners, and then Pharaoh’s dreams, he reminded them that only God can interpret dreams. He said to his brothers, “Even though you intended to do me harm, God intended it for good, in order to save his people, just as he has done.” Given the many tears Joseph shed, his trust in God doesn’t seem to have stopped him feeling sad. But there was peace in trusting God was working out his good purpose.

Conclusion

For now, life can be sad, and what we desire may be far from fulfilled. Nevertheless we can know the peace God has for everyone. “My peace I leave with you,” said Jesus. And in the Bible’s last book, we have the promise of a future free of sadness: “God will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain.”

That timeless truth was expressed poetically in a hymn not often sung now, but still worth hearing. It was written as a prayer by a young man whose heart was broken when the girl he loved left him:

O Love that will not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in thee.
I give thee back the life I owe,
That in thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.

O Joy that seekest me through pain,
I cannot close my heart to thee.
I trace the rainbow through the rain,
And feel the promise is not vain -
Morning shall tearless be.