Happiness

Luke 6.20-31

At countless children's parties, they have sung: ' If you're happy and you know it clap your hands, nod your head, stamp your feet, turn around, do all four.'

Let's just for a moment take the words of that seriously. If 'you're happy' and 'you know it'. Two things that may or may not be true. The first question is a huge one. Are you happy? I might mean 'Are you happy at this moment?' or 'are you happy in general?' The two are not necessarily connected. You might be generally very happy, but at this moment not be so happy because you stubbed your toe, and have a twinge in your foot. On the other hand you could be happy at this moment, because it delights you to be in church or wherever you are, but actually you have a deep sadness in general, because someone you love is ill or has died.

Our Gospel reading is all about happiness. We actually have the word 'Blessed', but if we try to find a less religious word, then the nearest we can get to it is 'Happy' – and that is the word you will find in some Bibles instead of Blessed. So what we heard was Jesus telling people how to be happy. I wonder what makes you most happy? Have a think about times when you can say 'That really made me very happy.'…….. I can't imagine what has been going through your mind. They will be very different things for each of us. And no-one can argue with you about them – they are your judgement on things. Hopefully none of you would share Ambrose Bierce's definition in 'The Devils' Dictionary' where he says 'Happiness – an agreeable sensation arising from contemplating the misery of others.' For many of you, it may well have been something like the opposite – what makes *us* happy is seeing *someone else* happy. What is most unlikely is that the things in your mind were like the things Jesus was saying in the reading just now. Some of them are really quite shocking – happy are the poor, happy are the hungry, happy are those who weep, happy are those who are hated on account of Jesus. Lots of people who don't know many things that Jesus said claim that they know these sayings (they sometimes get called the Beatitudes) but I don't think they actually think very deeply about what they mean. They are far too revolutionary and difficult for that.

The word 'happy' actually comes from an old word that is hardly ever used now – the word 'hap' which means 'chance' or 'luck'. And maybe that is why maybe it is better to think in terms of that old word 'blessed' rather than 'happy'. Because one thing is absolutely clear- it isn't a matter of chance or luck whether or not you are happy. It comes from the way we see the world, and our place in it. Many of you will know the Narnia children's books of C.S. Lewis – the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, and so on. He wrote lots of adult books as well. Let me read you something that comes

from one of those. ‘God designed the human machine to run on himself. He is the fuel our spirits are designed to burn. That is why it is no good asking God to make us happy in our own way without bothering about religion. God cannot give us a happiness apart from himself because there is no such thing.’ That is an amazing claim – we can only be truly happy if we take God seriously.

But that makes sense of the idea that in the formal scheme of things in the Roman Catholic Church, before a person can be declared a saint, they first of all have to be be beatified – and not the great Malapropism from one schoolchild, who said that people had to be *beautified* before they could become a saint! They are then referred to as ‘Blessed So-andSo’.That is the first step to sainthood. I think, since we are all called to be saints, that is a good idea for all of us. The first step is for us to be happy, blessed.

When we baptise a child, they are being told how much God loves them. And that is going to be true, whatever problems they may have to face in their lives – and of course there will be their fair share or more of those. But they have a real genuine cause to be happy – because whatever happens, nothing can take away that amazing fact of God’s love. And that begins to make sense of some of those strange things Jesus said about people being happy when they face persecution and so on. They might have big problems, but nothing could take away their happiness that comes from knowing God’s love. Paul writing to the Christians in Rome came up with that wonderful bit of poetry – ‘I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height not depth, nor anything else in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.’

How much God loves us is what we celebrate in Holy Communion – we come to remember that he loved us so much that Jesus died and rose again for us. On this All Saints Sunday we remember that we are surrounded by millions of unseen happy people – the blessed, happy saints – who through all the centuries of Christian history have known that love. May we know the happiness that only God can give us. If we are happy and know it, then maybe you don’t want to clap your hand, nod your head and so on. But if you’re happy and you know it – thank God, because he is where your happiness comes from – and that is not good luck, or chance, it is his will – what he wants for each one of us.