

Earlier this week I was doing something with the radio on, and heard a programme trailer which said that people are happiest when they are sixteen or seventy. I never heard the programme so I don't know why this was. It sounds plausible – when you're sixteen you don't yet have any significant responsibilities, and with a bit of luck by the time you're seventy your main responsibilities are under control; and you can have a bit of time for yourself. It's a drastic generalisation and there will be lots of people for whom it isn't true, but it made me think about happiness – something we all want to be. These days we are encouraged to feel we have to be happy all the time, and that we've somehow been cheated or are hard-done-by if we're not. We must be happy at home (despite the chores we don't like and all the niggles of family life); happy at work (notwithstanding the pressures, the unpleasant colleague and the pay-rise we didn't get); happy at leisure (possibly the most achievable because if it is genuine leisure we can choose how to use it, though there is always the conflict between reading the book and going to the gym). Happiness can be hard work!

There's another word which is much more laid-back: contentment. It's quiet satisfaction, calmer and more peaceful. I sat in the garden on Thursday in warm sunshine, crocuses out, cat curled up beside me, with a pre-prandial sherry and some pistachios. It doesn't get much better than that. Complete contentment. And then, of course, the potatoes boiled over. You can have moments of contentment in the midst of all sorts of other activities – you just have to catch it and notice.

The words happy and happiness don't crop up in the Bible very often – more often in modern language versions where, for example, the Beatitudes start 'Happy are those who...'. Content and contentment are even less common. Where they do occur they usually carry a sense of acceptance of the way things are; of not needing more. There's an important difference between not needing more and not wanting more. Contentment is not wanting.

The word which does appear all the time is 'blessed', and it is repeated throughout today's Old Testament and Gospel readings. It should be in the psalm as well, but the modern translators have got at it. Psalm 1 ought to begin: 'Blessed are those who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked'. Some of you know that I'm studying mediaeval books of psalms, many of which are beautifully illuminated. If there is going to be magnificent decoration anywhere it will be on the 'Beatus' page, the beginning of Psalm 1 where the first words (in Latin) are: 'Beatus vir qui non abiit in consilio impiorum' - 'Blessed are they.....'. There's so much more to 'blessed' than just 'happy'.

On most Sundays, a bit later on in the service, the priest says: 'Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation...' and you reply: 'Blessed be God for ever'. But how can we bless God? We can't give him a blessing. Surely that's something that God does? Which is true, but the Bible uses 'blessed' in three different ways. When someone says 'Blessed be God', they mean that God is to be worshipped, adored and thanked. We do this, and remind each other to do it, because of his goodness towards us. When the Bible says that a person or people are blessed, it means that they are fortunate. God blesses his servants because they are faithful. In the Old Testament this often means that they are prosperous; their crops and herds are fruitful and their families flourish. And if one person says 'Bless you' to another, they are asking God to reward or protect you. So: 'Blessed be God' is an act of worship, 'blessed are the merciful' means that God will reward them, and 'may God bless you' is a prayer for the person to find favour with God and escape sin or evil.

In the Old Testament this was clearly understood in very practical and rather circular terms. If God blesses you (or the people), things will go well, harvests will be good, the army will be successful in battle. If the people ask God to bless an enterprise, they want his help to make it go well, beyond what they can achieve by themselves. If everything is going well because the people are faithful to God's word, then they are blessed by God.

Our first reading shows that there is an opposite to a blessing – a curse. There are many curses in the Old Testament, often as part of rituals where priests or other leaders invoke blessings on their own people and curses on their enemies, or 'the ungodly'. Ultimately at the root of every curse there is sin and disobedience. The Israelites always have a choice: blessing or curse, life or death. God's continuing call to his people is to choose life.

The New Testament has a different atmosphere in this as in many things. There aren't many curses, though Jesus did once memorably curse a fig tree which didn't have any fruit. The crowd who gathered to hear Jesus teach, and to whom he gave the Beatitudes, knew all about the 'faith in God brings material prosperity' interpretation of blessing. They heard it regularly from their priests and scholars. But Jesus turned their expectations upside-down, deliberately using examples of all the people who looked least prosperous and most wretched to declare that they would be the ones whom God would bless – would reward.

There are two versions of the Beatitudes, in Matthew and Luke. Does anyone know the difference between them? Matthew is 'blessings only'. Luke, which we've read today, has curses too: woe to you who are rich, are full, are laughing, are spoken well of. There is no reward for you in the future if that is what is most important to you now. Present-day prosperity is no measure of true faithfulness and heavenly reward. Jesus has come to give us a new understanding, to overturn the old covenant God made with the children of Israel. He is God's ultimate blessing for the world, here for everyone no matter what their circumstances may be. To be truly blessed is to choose to follow Jesus, to choose the way of faithfulness rather than sin, to choose life rather than death. 'Blessed are they who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked....for the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked is doomed.'