

## CAN WE HAVE A HAPPY LENT?<sup>1</sup>

**A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, at Choral Matins on the Third Sunday of Lent, 23 March 2025**

When I discovered that I was to preach this morning, I immediately desired to preach a happy sermon. Although I recoiled from assuming the role of Dr Pangloss in Voltaire's *Candide*, who, you will remember, proclaimed that all was for the best in the "best of all possible worlds",<sup>2</sup> I had also tired of resembling the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: Death, Famine, War and Conquest.<sup>3</sup> Well, I exaggerate, but you know what I mean. Where is the light at the end of the tunnel, if, indeed, the tunnel has an end?

Then I asked myself whether happiness was permitted in Lent. After all, we are enjoined to have a "holy Lent". Nobody ever says, "Have a happy Lent". I'm sure I would have noticed and been surprised. Happiness ended on Shrove Tuesday, when we enjoyed our pancakes.

Coincidentally, I discovered that last Thursday, 20 March, was World Happiness Day, when the World Happiness Report for 2025 was released<sup>4</sup> Finland remains the happiest country in the world. We are number 11, with New Zealand next at 12. The UK is 23 and the USA 24. At the bottom, 147, is Afghanistan.

Writing in the Harvard Business Review in 2021,<sup>5</sup> Australian Penny Locaso,<sup>6</sup> punctured one common misperception about happiness: that it is a goal to be achieved by a career and possessions. Instead, she said it is a state of mind to be achieved by focus, courage and curiosity. But she still misses the point. Happiness is not a goal, it is an outcome, a product. Happiness does not come because you seek it. You discover that it has arrived.

Writing in *Church Times* on American Independence Day, 14 July 2023, Anglican priest and poet, Malcolm Guite, took issue with the American Declaration of Independence's call for the "pursuit of Happiness". He said:

I'm not sure that happiness is, in itself, something that can be pursued. Rather, it is something that arises spontaneously and unlooked for in the midst of other pursuits. If one were constantly taking one's own emotional pulse and saying "Is this happiness? Am I happy now?" that very self-analysis would destroy the conditions that make happiness possible.<sup>7</sup>

Pope Francis said much the same when he spoke in St Peter's Square in September 2017:

To spend one's own talents, one's energy and one's time only to save, protect and fulfil oneself, in reality leads to losing oneself, i.e. to a sad and barren existence. Instead let us live for the Lord and base our life on love, as Jesus did: we will be able to savour authentic joy, and our life will not be barren; it will be fruitful.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Readings: Deuteronomy 6:4-9; John 17:1a, 11b-19

<sup>2</sup> [Candide - Wikipedia](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse - Wikipedia](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Home | The World Happiness Report](#)

<sup>5</sup> [What You Were Taught About "Happiness" Isn't True](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Penny's Bio - HackingHappy.co](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Malcolm Guite: Poet's Corner](#)

<sup>8</sup> [Angelus, 3 September 2017 | Francis](#)

You may be interested to know that, in the NRSV New Testament, the word “happy” occurs only once. At the beginning of chapter 19 of St Luke’s gospel is the story of the short-statured tax collector, Zacchaeus, who climbed a tree to see Jesus as he approached Jericho. Recognising him, Jesus invited himself to stay at Zacchaeus’s house. Surprised, he climbed down and was “happy to welcome him”. By contrast, “happy” appears 30 times in Psalms. The fundamental context of those occurrences is the same as in the story of Zacchaeus: they refer to people who hear and respond to God’s call. The Psalmist suggests that we will be happy if we have an appropriate relationship with God, seek justice and refrain from evil. In most cases the term is used in the present tense. Thus, the psalms agree that happiness is not a goal but a result.

My searches led me to Rowan Williams’ 2011 Easter sermon in Canterbury Cathedral, when he was still the archbishop.<sup>9</sup> He began by acknowledging that happiness is “something that has crept up on us when we weren’t looking”. It is something that comes from outside, something we can’t generate for ourselves. He also asked the question with which I began: “How can I feel ‘happy’ in a world so full of atrocity and injustice?”

He was, of course, speaking from the other side of Lent, on the occasion to which this season is progressing. But he warns us that the happiness generated by Easter does not

... guarantee a permanently happy society in the sense of a society free from tension, pain or disappointment, but [affirms] that whatever happens in the unpredictable world—sometimes wonderfully, sometimes horribly unpredictable—there is a deeper level of reality, a world within the world, where love and reconciliation are ceaselessly at work, a world with which contact can be made so that we are able to live honestly and courageously with the challenges constantly thrown at us.

When I was reading the references to happiness in the Psalms, I thought that what they were promoting was “virtue”, the development of an habitual practice, something that we learn to do, almost automatically, something that is good. In an article in *The Guardian* a year before his 2011 Easter sermon, Williams commented on the importance of virtue if we are to develop the kind of social supports and interactions that make for happiness.<sup>10</sup> This involves

... the cultivation of virtue, a word that is hard for many to take seriously. But it's high time we reclaimed it. We have no other way of talking about the qualities of human behaviour that make us more than reactive and self-protective—courage, foresight, self-critical awareness and concern for balanced universal welfare ...

You will have to judge for yourselves whether I have preached a happy sermon. But I encourage you to look always to the end of our Lenten journey. While you are on your way, you could take with you Malcolm Guite’s sonnet on “Joy”.

How does she come, my joy, when she comes walking  
Over the wasteland and the empty waves?  
She comes unbidden between sleep and waking,  
She comes like winter jasmine on cold graves,  
She comes like some swift wind, she fills my sails,  
And on we surge, cresting the wine-dark sea,  
The fine prow lifting, as my vessel heels,  
The tiller tugs and quivers, and I’m free  
Of all the land’s long cares. As that brisk breeze

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<sup>9</sup> [Archbishop of Canterbury's 2011 Easter Sermon](#)

<sup>10</sup> [Out of the abyss of individualism | Rowan Williams | The Guardian](#)

Sings in the thrill and tremor of taut stays,  
So my heart's rigging, tuned and taut as these,  
Sings with the wind that freshens into praise.  
For when Joy comes, however brief her stay,  
She parts my lips, and I know how to pray.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> [Lent with Herbert Day 15: Joy | Malcolm Guite](#) This sonnet arose from reflections on George Herbert's poem, "Prayer". [Prayer \(I\) | The Poetry Foundation](#)