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Christ Church West Wimbledon
Sermon :
Second Sunday in Advent ~ December 10, 2017

A couple of weeks ago I went to a seminar organised by the Bishop of Kingston focussing on the spirituality of young people. One fact stood out – a large group of young people were asked what their main goal in life was – and the clear answer was ‘happiness’. This was achieved through “being myself, connecting with others and the universe without harming them”. Yes, they acknowledged that bad things do happen but they can be overcome to restore happiness. So I ask today “Are you happy, are you content with your life?”

I want you to think about that, because it strikes me that many people today are remarkably discontented with their lives. They are incredibly restless. They are very dissatisfied. They are deeply unhappy. They yearn for new and different things – a new or different car, a new or different job, a new or different house, a new or different experience, a new or different set of relatives or friends or whatever – maybe even a new or different church. Of course we will know that being content is not the same as being complacent. There are often things we should and can change to make our lives and the lives of those around us better and richer and we should not stop doing that; none of us should ever slide into being complacent.

So “are you happy, content with your life?” Or are you restlessly yearning for your dream job, dream house, dream family? Or restlessly yearning for your retirement to take a different course? Last Sunday, I was very happy that our Annual Advent Fair had gone so well – not just that we had made a good profit, but that there was, vital in my view, a significantly happy atmosphere. Everyone was working well together. There was a unity about the place that spoke of stability, contentment. Yes, of course many worked very hard – but everyone seemed to have an air of happiness about what they were doing.

However, in trying to answer the question, are you content, are you happy, it all depends to whom you are directing your enquiry. Ask someone who is bereaved, or who is enduring ill-health or facing a terminal illness or even close to death, whether they are content, whether they are happy, and they might well reply quite robustly that they are certainly not particularly content or happy and nor should they expect to be. So maybe the words ‘content’, ‘happy’ are the wrong ones to use. Maybe the question is “Are you at peace?”

So I re-phrase my original question – not “are you content”, “are you happy” – so much as “are you at peace with your life?”

Today, the 2nd Sunday of Advent, we begin to reflect upon John the Baptist. Already John the Baptist is on the Advent scene, preparing the way for the coming of the Messiah by helping the people to realign their lives. I like that phrase “realign their lives”. Car drivers sometimes have to get tyres realigned – because they have been knocked out of alignment by hitting a kerb or whatever – and so the car is not running smoothly. So John the Baptist, as predicted by Isaiah, bursts on the scene in the beginning of Mark’s Gospel, to help the people to realign their lives with the claim that the Messiah is entering into our ordinary human lives. Peter picks up this theme in the Epistle with the assurance that God is patient with us all, going on to exhort us to live holy and godly lives, and encouraging us to make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him; at peace.

Many years ago in 1981 Anwar Sadat, the President of Egypt was violently assassinated. The next year his widow was announced as Woman of the Year – and in her acceptance speech she said this: “It is important to be at peace with your family; it is important to be at peace with your friends – but, above all, it is important to be at peace with yourself”.

John the Baptist came baptising but he directed the people to look for the powerful person of great honour who would be coming shortly and whose baptism would not be with water but the Holy Spirit of God. Susan Sayers, a writer, pictures this: “just imagine standing, dripping and cleansed by the Jordan, as you hear about someone who will drench you in the holiness of the Spirit of God. It must have triggered in many the deep longing and expectant thirsting for God, which allows hearts to be softened” – and lives to be realigned.

Advent is a good opportunity when we might try to make time to pause and stop, even for a short while, to realign our lives by thinking through the question “am I at peace with my life”? If the answer is no, then maybe we need to make time to examine which bits of our lives are not at peace, maybe pray about them, maybe talk them over with someone we trust.

What was it the American theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr prayed? “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference”. We only have one life to live. This is not a rehearsal. It is the real thing. So we all need to come to terms with our life and to achieve in it at least a measure of peace.

I finish with a prayer I often use at carol services: “O God, we thank you for the message of peace that Christmas brings to our distracted world. Give peace among the nations; peace in our land; peace in our homes and peace in our hearts, as we remember the birth at Bethlehem of the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.