

# Along the track

## Happiness

In a very real sense, we are created by the choices we make every day. Big or small, momentous or seemingly trivial, they all make their mark on who we are and what we might become. The vast majority of those decisions are about choosing things or deciding to do something that will make us happy, which we sometimes mistakenly equate to status, control and pleasure.

No one wants to live without leaving their mark. We are told so often now that we are special. That's true but we can also be told mistakenly that we can be whatever we want, and in reality that's not true. But that sort of pressure heightens the need to achieve something of significance, to leave a permanent mark or legacy. That is a big motivator. The problem is, we are bombarded with celebrity magazines, news items, lifestyle programs that make us think we can only achieve this by becoming famous in some way, a person known to the world, a household word, someone with his or her name in lights. We will be happy if we are like this person or we have these things or go to the right places. Is that what makes us try to achieve something of significance, something that will stand out, something that will last?

In a world that is doing its best to make us somebody else, to live the dream, it's a tough battle to be nobody-but-yourself. And that battle is a never ending story! Perhaps one of the easiest things we can achieve is to be someone we don't really want to be. We don't even realise that is what is happening sometimes, we can become so focused on what others expect.

There are a lot of 'if only's' in our search for happiness – if only I wasn't in this situation, if only I had this or that, if only I could meet so and so, if only I had more money, if only I wasn't so tired. If only we had perfect health, a much better job, less tension in our relationships, no anxiety and, of course, the time and money to enjoy the good life. We also tend to equate happiness with pleasure, and we equate that with the absence of hardship, pain, disappointment or tension.

But happiness doesn't rely on having a dream run; having it all, as it were. In Jesus' words, happy are the poor, not the rich and influential, happy are the meek, not those who seek power and prestige and authority, happy are those who sympathise with others, who walk with those who mourn, who share their sorrows and sufferings, how happy are those who stand up for what they believe, and those who work for justice and fairness and peace. Jesus told us that the litmus test for success in life is how much we have reached out to others, how much we have given of ourselves, how much we have gone out of our way for others – for I was lonely and you visited, sick and you were with me, I was in prison and you did not abandon me, you still reached out, I was hungry and thirsty and you looked after me (Mt 25).

To put it bluntly, no self-centered person has much chance of finding lasting happiness, let alone making anyone else happy! Neither does a person who finds it hard to unearth things to be grateful for. The art of being happy lies in an acceptance that, at whatever stage of life we find ourselves in, we are needed, we have a purpose. We may not be able to become whatever we want, whenever we want but someone needs who we are now. Happiness comes from a realisation that we are gifted and talented for that very purpose. Despite the fact that we cannot do or be whatever we want, there is a freedom in that, and a challenge, to be the person we were meant to be, to use the gifts and talents we have been given.

Happiness comes from a realisation that we will not be asked to do more than is expected of us, more than we are capable of doing. When St Paul found himself in difficulties, a thorn in his flesh to stop himself from getting above his station, to stop him from 'exalting himself', he found that very hard but he came to a greater realisation of Jesus' words: 'My grace is sufficient for you (2 Cor 12:9)'. We will not be asked to do more than we are capable of doing in life, we won't be asked to be 'someone else'. That doesn't mean, however, there won't be challenges, that we won't be drawn out of our comfort zone at times. Often such challenges can be times of greatest growth. In Pope John XXIII's words: "Consult not your fears but your hopes and dreams. Think not about your frustrations, but about your unfulfilled potential. Concern yourself not with what you tried and failed in, but with what is still possible for you to do."

Happiness comes from a realisation that there is a spiritual dimension in life and it also needs care and attention. We cannot ignore it, we are both body and soul. We all know that, no matter how good it gets, we still experience unhappiness, restlessness, frustration, lack of fulfilment. Even when we experience some measure of love, friendship, achievement, satisfaction, we may still feel restless and dissatisfied. This dissatisfaction or restlessness is calling us ever deeper. We might fill our lives with pleasures of all kinds, yet still find our deepest desire still unfulfilled – until we discover that some relationship with God was the answer all along.

Finally, developing the skill of finding happiness in the ordinary, everyday things is perhaps the greatest gift of all.

Regards  
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