

Talk: The Happiness Industry and the Illusion of Wellbeing

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The Chaplain

Reading: Psalm 1

The word happiness comes from the same root as happen. Originally, to be happy wasn't a state you could manufacture or sustain- it was what happened to you. It arrived unexpectedly, as a byproduct of something else- usually a life well lived. In that sense, Psalm 1 gives us a startling definition: "Happy is the one who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked... but delights in the law of the Lord." In other words, happiness is not a goal. It's a consequence. It follows goodness. It happens on the way to something else.

But today, we live in the shadow of the happiness industry—a multi-billion-dollar machine built on the promise that happiness is an achievable state, something you can optimise, manage, or buy. This industry has sold us an impossible dream: that if we are not happy, something must be wrong. And that belief, ironically, has made us miserable.

We've become convinced that our unhappiness is itself a kind of failure. We've learned to narrate every moment of discomfort, every dip in mood, as a crisis of self. But this creates a dangerous consequence: when real suffering enters the room – grief, poverty, trauma – we struggle to recognise it. We've been trained to believe that all suffering is equal. That our privileged pain – our stress, our boredom, our discontent – deserves the same airtime as someone else's collapse. The result is a culture that is full of talk, but empty of listening.

Psalm 1 points us to another way. Not the pursuit of happiness, but the cultivation of character. Not self-optimization, but rootedness: like a tree planted by streams of water. The irony, of course, is that this harder path—of listening, loving, serving- is what often produces the joy we were chasing in the first place. Joy is what remains when we stop obsessing over happiness. And in that sense, Psalm 1 is not just a poem—it's a protest against the shallow promises of the wellbeing industry. It calls us back to depth, to decency, and to the kind of life that bears fruit in its season.