

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.