

13 July 2008

‘Truly alive!’

Romans 8:1-11

Many of us feel guilty while we’re enjoying ourselves; and, as a result, we are losing the health benefits that pleasure can give us. That was the conclusion of a report published about ten years ago by an international study group known as ARISE – ‘Associates for Research Into the Science of Enjoyment’. You might be interested to know that, of the eight European nationalities included in the study, the Dutch had the most relaxed attitude to pleasure and enjoyed themselves more than anyone else; while the Germans both ranked bottom of the pleasure league and felt guiltier than anyone else. British people gave out a more mixed message: while we ranked highly in our ability to enjoy ourselves, we also claimed to feel very guilty afterwards. No wonder we get so stressed!

The research for this report was co-ordinated by Professor David Warburton, the Head of Psychopharmacology at the University of Reading. He said, “Guilt acts as an important social check on personal behaviour, such as preventing people from committing crime. However, it can be misplaced when it is related to lifestyle. In its extreme, chronic guilt can induce stress and depression which could lead to eating disorders and contribute to infection, ulcers, heart problems and even brain damage”. The Professor went on to say, “A number of common pleasures – such as eating chocolate and sweet things, smoking and lack of exercise – attract high levels of guilt, perhaps reflecting the high profile of health campaigns which have affected the way people view their pleasures. People should not feel guilty about pleasure-giving activities, as long they don’t over-indulge or harm others”.

So the message given out by this report – and widely reported in the media at the time – was a very clear one: enjoying a little bit of whatever-tickles-our-fancy does us good, and we should all feel much less guilty about having a good time. That must have been a tonic for party-loving Britain! Unfortunately, when Professor Warburton retired in 2003, an astute journalist did some ferreting around in the University of Reading’s archives, and uncovered some very interesting information about ARISE’s funding. In particular, its main sponsors were the Coca-Cola Company and, especially, the giant BAT tobacco corporation. Suddenly the results of the research could be seen in a new light; they were hardly value-neutral and unbiased scientific conclusions.

In a sense, I’m rather disappointed by that; because I feel that guilt actually is a crippling problem for many people and it certainly can have long-term effects on mental and physical health. For instance, workers are made to feel guilty by their employers for not achieving impossible targets. (Their guilt is intensified if those people are perfectionists to begin with). Tragically, abused women - innocent victims - who have been beaten by their partners often feel burdened by huge amounts of guilt; they often say, “It’s all my fault”, even though it quite clearly isn’t. And other women can feel guilty throughout their whole life because of an illicit abortion they had way back in their teens.

There are lots of other reasons for people feeling guilty. You will know that last week saw the twentieth anniversary of the terrible Piper Alpha oil platform disaster in which 167 people died. And, as is often the case in such disasters, some of the survivors feel a sense of guilt, not because they did anything to contribute to the fire and explosion, but simply because they escaped while other people perished; or because they feel they could have done something more to save their friends, even though rationally they know that was utterly impossible.

Finally, many thinking people feel guilty for circumstances and issues completely beyond their control. I am sure there are people in church today – I am one of them – who feel the taint of guilt upon our country for the invasion of Iraq and its horrendous consequences (although I am aware that there may be other folk who do not accept that and still say, “We did the right thing”. I respect their view even though I cannot agree with it). Last year, many of us started feeling guilty when we recognised how much

of Britain's wealth and development was built upon the cruelty and oppression of the transatlantic slave trade; some of us may have felt that they should align with the many apologies that were sent to Africa and the West Indies, not least by the Christian churches.

And I suspect that the majority of more thoughtful Western Christians feel guilty simply because they have been born in a land of wealth and plenty while other people are hungry, destitute and threatened by powers over which they have no control. Is it sometimes personal guilt rather than true Christian concern that inspires us to take campaigning action to make the world a fairer place? And, if that's true, is that necessarily a bad thing, anyway? That's surely a question worth asking.

But to all these guilty people God has a marvellous and liberating message, which we find at the beginning of one of the greatest passages in the entire Bible. In Romans 8, at the end of a lengthy argument about the entrapment of human nature by malevolent sin, and just as he seems to have entangled himself with no possibility of wriggling free, Paul triumphantly cries out, "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life has set me free". And the rest of the chapter is a wonderful description of how faith in the risen Jesus Christ and an awareness of the pulsating life of God's Spirit enables the true believer to rise above the power of sin, to enjoy the power and blessings of God's spiritual energy and to live the guilt-free life for which we were created.

I have to say that this is not the message that Christianity has always proclaimed. It is fair criticism to say that the Church has just as often placed people in bondage – at times quite literally – as it has sought to set them free. Our particular brand of nonconformist Christianity is certainly not without guilt in this respect: back in the Victorian era much of Christian life was governed by petty mores and regulations which seemed to restrict people rather than free them. To have the force of character to break the minutiae of these legalistic rules was not easy; and any person who did break them was made to feel shameful and guilty. The impression given of God was of a stern headmaster who enjoyed discrediting and punishing us; Paul's message of forgiveness of joy and freedom had somehow got lost along the way.

So there may well have been too much guilt and self-righteous condemnation around in Britain a hundred or so years ago. In some ways it is good for our society to feel less guilt-ridden than it used to – but there is a down-side as well. People break appointments at the last minute without compunction and without feeling any responsibility to the other person they have let down. Supposedly honest citizens can swindle insurance companies out of vast sums of money and feel that they have not hurt anybody – after all, theirs is a victimless crime. Journalists at the seedier end of the tabloid press revel in cooking up a juicy story which has destroyed a celebrity's career and wrecked their marriage – claiming in their defence that 'that's just what happens if you're in the public eye'.

But perhaps there is a difference between buckling down to take responsibility for our actions – which must be a good thing; and feeling quite unnecessarily guilty about acts which we cannot now undo. Or perhaps our problem is that we simply feel guilty about the wrong things: we lie awake worrying about some trivial social gaffe we have committed while letting the really significant issues flow over us. As Christians, we quite rightly feel responsible for what we do; we know that we are answerable to our consciences, to God and to the whole of humankind for the way we speak and live. But I am quite convinced that it is utterly wrong for us to spend our entire existence weighed down by the guilt of our own faults (never mind the mistakes of our ancestors!) and the sins of the world. That is not what God intends.

For God intends us to be free. The job of bearing the sin of the world has already been done: it was carried out two thousand years ago by Jesus, dying on the Cross, bowed down in agony by the excruciating burden of humanity's evil and wrong-doing. And when Jesus cried out, "It is finished!", that was not merely a cry announcing the end of his earthly life, but a yell of victory announcing that the task for which he had come to earth had been completed. We may not very much like the idea of atonement which states that Christ took our guilt in order that we could be declared free; but it is a fundamental part of New Testament theology and should give every Christian the experience of a wonderful liberation. As

Jesus himself said, when the Son of God sets us free, we are truly free indeed. Condemnation and guilt have been done away with for ever.

You will be pleased to know that I do not have a criminal record. Nor do I have any points on my driving licence because the camera that flashed me on the Norwich road must have used up its film before I got there! And, as far as I know, my credit record is pretty good as well. But there are some people who get very worried when they apply for jobs – or even to rent a car – because they know there is something on their record that might show up from their past. Whatever they did all those years ago has nothing to do with their lives today; their conviction is spent, their driving record is now clean – yet they are still ashamed of the details which the archives may dredge up. Guilt still haunts them.

With Christ, things aren't like that. As far as God is concerned, our faith in Jesus as Saviour has effectively expunged the record of our past misdemeanours – however serious they may have been. And, unlike on a blackboard, where you can still see the faint outline of the words that were written on it before it was wiped, we truly have been forgiven and also been given the new energy of God's Spirit for living. Our duty now is to take the message of Christ's freedom to the world – a message of freedom from oppression, of liberation from inequality, of liberty to live life to the full rather than simply existing. Christians should certainly be involved in every process which brings full humanity to those who are denied it by corrupt forces and dark powers.

But our most basic message of all is not practical, nor political. It doesn't deal with the world's structures, nor with physical human needs, however important doing so may be. No; our fundamental message is one which touches the deepest level of the human spirit. It is simply one that says, 'In God's name, you are forgiven' – so that, like eagles, we can soar into the air, enjoy all the good things that our Creator has put into his wonderful world, and experience the contentment of a guilt-free, unfettered life.