



I hear that, consequent to the pandemic, some people are calling for the government to give attention to people's happiness. Happiness is, of course, important but it's not something you can contrive.

Once we were told that "Happiness is a cigar named 'Hamlet'" and, in 2010, the Government launched a survey to measure the nation's happiness; to assess what gives a sense of "general wellbeing" to be assessed alongside traditional economic indicators. It's obvious that there is "more to life than money", but judging by the way the media portray the run up to Christmas as a frenzy of shopping and suggest a level of panic when the shops

don't sell as much as in previous years, one would think that our happiness is linked to how much we spend.

HAPPINESS AND JOY\

According to the Concise Oxford Dictionary, happiness is defined as 'lucky, fortunate; contented with one's lot; glad or pleased ... slightly drunk'! Well, the latter might define what Christmas involves for some, but is that all Christmas is meant to convey – a general sense of well-being? Happy Christmas...

Perhaps the French have it right – Joyeux Noel – a joy-filled Christmas. Joy is a far stronger word than happy. Joy is 'a vivid emotion of pleasure': and, maybe, that's what those shepherds experienced when they encountered the child in the manger and St. John experienced when he beheld the glory of God in Christ. Christians know that joy is not something you can acquire but a fruit of the Holy Spirit, a consequence of being in union with God. We may not always feel happy, but we can be joyful, for joy is a far deeper experience than a sense of mere contentment.

We know that the shepherds received "good news of great joy for all () people" (Lk. 2:10) as they listened to the message of the angels. And we know that when Mary visited her cousin her baby leapt with joy in the womb of Elizabeth. And, finally, the wise men arrived at Bethlehem they were "overwhelmed with joy" (Matt. 2:10)

So joy is a gift that comes through an encounter with God in Christ. Our celebration of Christmas is more than a season of goodwill or a time to be happy. Rather, it involves the mind, body and that third dimension the English find so hard to acknowledge – spirit.

Listening to the way some have spoken of the pandemic I'm deeply saddened by the inability of broadcasters, in particular, to acknowledge this dimension. It's something all faith's hold to be of profound importance but, for the past fifty years or more, our secular society has ignored or dismissed this hidden, life-giving aspect of our humanity. And, in doing so, many have robbed of the means of addressing the deepest aspects of life. Instead, we've come to the point where all that secular society can offer to aid people in their needs is another series of 'Strictly Come Dancing'.

We are part of the Divine Mystery, a theme developed in the latest issue of the '[Fairacres Chronicle](#)', the bi-annual publication of the community of the Sisters of the Love of God, in an article which included reference to the way [Evelyn Underhill](#) described humankind as 'amphibious'. She didn't mean we were like frogs, but that in order to be fully human we need to develop spiritually as well as physically. Physical exercises are beneficial, but we mustn't become fixated on them to the detriment of our need to exercise spiritually: during this pandemic, muscle building hardly matters if you are lost inside. We need to be exercising our life in Christ because the Incarnation declares that God has entered our flesh and to be fully human is to recognise and nurture that fact. Nor do we do so for our benefit alone, but for the sake of the whole world. A short poem by Sr. Macrina Wiederkehr OSB sums this up so well:

O frail and glorious creature
whoever you are cherish this truth:

- there are hints of glory in your being
- seeds of splendour
- traces of holiness.

To be divinised is your destiny.
Your original union
yearns for a place in your life.

Walk gently, then, with your frailty.
Allow it to bless you.
It will not cripple you
Unless you run from it.
Embrace it instead.
Carry it as one carries
the cherished secret of a great wealth
hidden away in a holy, eternal space.
Like treasure hidden in a field.

That's you!
You, fragile, noble being.
Little-Great-One.
Yes, there are whispers of greatness
in the frail envelope of your being.

The heavens have heard
whispers of your splendour.
And God still weeps at your birth.