
When Do We Get to Be Happy?

An Evensong meditation by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
Easter 4 – Year C

[Invocation]

So, it's Mothers' Day weekend. You know of course that humorous expression about the power of mothers in our families. I think I first heard it on that Carol Burnett show called, "Mama's Family." It may not be politically correct, because it's such a stereotype about mothers. But we all get to have a good laugh out of it anyway. It's that line in the show where somebody says: 'When mama ain't happy, ain't *nobody* happy!' Oh well, nowadays it's such a cliché; one of those true stereotypes that even moms get to laugh about—I hope!

But here's a faith question related to all that. I wonder: If it's a truism that, 'When mama ain't happy, ain't nobody happy'—if it's a cliché that mothers wield that kind of power in our families—then can the opposite also be true: that 'when mama *is* happy, then *everybody's* happy?' Or, 'when mama's happy, *everybody can* be happy?' Or how about this moralizing version: 'When mama's happy, then shouldn't everybody else also be happy?'

Now, I'm your preacher here today. And I can't fail to note that these Mothers' Day matters arise in the middle of our Easter season, in the year of our Lord, 2019. And in Eastertide we continue to focus on the claim that an amazing event happened some two thousand years ago that is still true for us today. "Alleluia, the Lord is risen!" That's right: go ahead . . . [you can say the right answer to that claim right now:] "The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!" Yes, that's the right answer.

And now here's the faith question for our consideration today: How are we enjoying the bliss of believing and living the reality that because Christ has risen from the dead, we too may enter into the bliss of resurrection life?

The word, "bliss," is a choice one for here, because it's the word that Julian of Norwich highlighted in her celebrated description of Jesus as our Mother. Last Wednesday, May 8th, we observed the feast of Lady Julian of Norwich, England. She was the medieval anchoress who died on that date in the year 1416. Many of us know her best for her enchanting expression, 'All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.' But Julian is also distinguished by a unique declaration. "Just as God is our Father"—she notably declared: "Just as God is our Father, so God is also our Mother." ("Revelations of Divine Love" LIX, LXXXVI www.vatican.va/spirit/documents/spirit_20010807_giuliana-norwich_en.html)

Without any sense of gender confusion, Julian discerned the motherhood God in the *second* person of the Holy Trinity, that is, in Christ. "Our true mother, Jesus," she wrote:

Our true mother, Jesus . . . was in labour for the full time until he suffered the sharpest pangs and the most grievous sufferings that ever were or shall be, and at the last . . . when it was finished . . . he had born us to bliss . . .

So, there's her image, 'he birthed us into bliss.' And then she repeats that image even more graphically.

The mother can give her child her milk to suck, but our dear mother Jesus can feed us . . . most generously and most tenderly with the holy sacrament which is the precious food of life itself . . .

The mother can lay the child tenderly to her breast, but our tender mother Jesus, he can familiarly lead us into his blessed breast through his sweet open side, and show within part of the Godhead . . . the joys of heaven, with spiritual certainty of endless bliss . . . (*Divine Revelations*, pp. 141-142; <https://www.soulshpherd.org/jesus-true-mother/>)

“With *spiritual* certainty.” Here Julian qualified our assurance of endless bliss in a conditional way. There are two ways I commend for fulfilling her condition of “spiritual” certainty in order to experience Easter bliss. One condition is the requirement of faith: the requirement that we make the effort to believe the biblical assurances we get, for example, at the end of today’s gospel reading, where Jesus declares:

[To] my sheep . . . I give . . . eternal life, and . . . No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father’s hand. (John 10:27-29)

You may recall a similar claim where St. Paul writes to the Romans:

that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come . . . nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39)

But also, I want to commend a contemplative practice that we can use to internalize spiritual certainty regarding endless bliss. I call it contemplative because it requires that we meditate on various expressions that we can repeat to ourselves again and again. Consider that we are hearing these expressions from the voice of God, or from our own hearts—our inner selves; expressions like, ‘Nothing can snatch me out of the hand of God.’

Here’s a humanist variation from my secular, peer counseling community: ‘If I never did another thing, my life would be just fine.’

Or with a Christian spin to it: ‘If I never did another thing, I would be assured of endless bliss in the love of God.’

Or consider the declaration from the margin notes of the Cathedral service leaflet we read on Good Friday: “All that can be done, has been done.”

And here’s a related hymn in the Methodist tradition, composed by Charles Wesley in the 1700s:

Love’s redeeming work is done;
fought the fight, the battle won:
see, our Sun’s eclipse has passed;
see, the dawn has come at last!

(Cf. the All Saints Beverly Hills composition by Thomas Foster: <https://youtu.be/Bug0JsAR100>)

As a musical meditation, we have our offertory anthem for this Evensong service here at the Cathedral today. It’s based on Christopher Smart’s poem also from the 1700s that begins, “Rejoice in God, O ye Tongues.” Ecstatically in that poem, we hear how “*all of creation glorifies God, simply by being what it was created to be.*” (Quoting our Canon Musician, Dale Adelman at: <https://www.cathedralatl.org/Sermons/reflection-on-rejoice-in-the-lamb-dale-adelman/>)

And finally, of course, we have Lady Julian’s celebrated claim: ‘All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.’

In any, or in all these ways, may we find the expressions that enable us to live blissfully in the faith claim: If in Jesus our Mother we are happy, we may be truly happy.

In the name of God: our Father, *Mother*, and Holy Spirit. Amen!

High Street Hymns
Love’s Redeeming Work is Done
Words: Charles Wesley

<https://youtu.be/SswQL5cVnUg>

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