

GNP or GNH?

May 3, 2009 at St. James Westminster, London, ON
- Archdeacon Ken Anderson -

Let me tell you a silly story.
A groaner, actually, but a groaner with a point.

An Irishman is walking along the beach
when he spots a bottle lying in the sand.
As he picks it up and brushes it off, out pops a genie.
The Genie says, "Since you have freed me from the bottle,
I will grant you three wishes."
The Irishman took only a second to respond,
"I'm feeling a might thirsty, I think I'll be wishing for a pint of stout."

POOF! There is a pint of stout in his hand.
He drinks it down, and starts to throw the bottle away, when the genie says:
"I'd look at that bottle again before I threw it, if I were you."
So he looks at the bottle,
and it is magically filling back up with stout.
The genie reminded him:
"That is a magic bottle, and it will always fill back up after you finish it."
The genie then asked:
"What other two wishes can I grant for you?"

The Irishman looks at the bottle in his hand and says:
"I'll be taking two more of these."

(I did give an alert.)
Isn't it the case that, so often, we wish for things, we lust for things,
without asking ourselves the more important question,
"What will bring me true happiness in life?"
Most of us have two cars, three computers, sometimes four telephones ...
Yet when the genie pops out of the bottle we say:
"I'll be taking a couple more of these."
It's part of our culture to think this way.
Every ad impels us to think this way.

I came across a very unsettling quote this week.
What do you think of this?
"Uncomplicated happiness is disappearing in the developing world
as fast as old-growth forests."
Most of us in the western world have already bought into the notion
that 'things' give us pleasure.

How unsettling!

In a recent survey,

people were asked what their favourite activity was.

It wasn't service to others;

it wasn't saving money;

it wasn't getting better educated;

it wasn't even sex.

The most preferred activity in North America is shopping.

Impulse shopping.

eBay and Internet shopping.

Shopping to amuse oneself, to while away the time, to be a form of therapy.

This has become a core-value of our post-modernist culture.

I'll be taking two more of these.

I'll upgrade that. Supersize this.

An elderly woman decided to prepare her will

and told her pastor that she had two final requests.

First, she wanted to be cremated.

Second, she wanted her ashes scattered all over Wal-Mart.

"Wal-Mart?" the preacher exclaimed. "Why Wal-Mart?"

"Then I'll be sure my daughters visit me twice a week!"

So much of what we do revolves around shopping and material things.

One of the ways we measure our success is what is called the GNP,

the Gross National Product.

(Its twin sister is the Gross Domestic Product.)

These indicators point to how much we produce, how much we consume,

and the not-so-hidden implications are that the more

we produce and the more we consume

the better off we are and the more happiness we will have.

A few years ago,

a tiny Asian country in the Himalayan Mountains

challenged that measurement.

The country is Bhutan (pronounced boo-TAN)

And it has come up with a new measurement

that has gained world-wide attention the GNH.

Gross National Happiness.

The ultimate aim of GNP is to make people rich.

The ultimate aim of GNH is to make people happy.

The government in Bhutan supports sustainable development.

Preserves and promotes cultural values.

Protects the natural environment.

It speaks not just of economic wellness and political wellness,
but environmental wellness, mental wellness,
workplace and social wellness.
These are built into the fabric of the constitution.
High consumption of goods is not even mentioned.

Sir Edmund Hillary,
the great mountaineer who had explored the Himalayas
brings it closer to home.
He said, "I have enjoyed great satisfaction from my climb of Everest.
But my most worthwhile things have been building schools
and medical clinics. That has given me more satisfaction
than a footprint on a mountain."

The concept of Gross National Happiness helps redefine
how the world should look and what our priorities should be.
At its heart there is an insistence that the material world
and the spiritual world be in closer harmony.
That the material world, without the spiritual world,
is nothing more than dust and ashes.

Here we are in the middle of a service of Baptism.
The service is helping redefine who we are and what we stand for.
There is a critically important part of this worship
which we call the Baptismal Covenant.

Question and answer time.

Do you believe in a heavenly Creator who lovingly crafted
a rich tapestry called the planetary system?

Do you believe that this God sent his Son
to suffer, to die, to rise again so that we
might enjoy life in all its fullness forevermore?

Those, perhaps are the big questions, the theological questions,
that help shape and define us.

There were other questions that bring this close to home as well.

Will you persevere in resisting evil?

Will you seek and serve Christ in all other persons?

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people?

Will you respect the dignity of every human being?

And because Sidney and Ella and David and Heath and Madelynne
are too young yet to understand the huge implications of those questions,
you, the parents and god-parents, answered to the best of your ability.

You said 'yes' to those defining questions.
We, as the wider community, said we would support you.

Many questions you ask of yourselves are important for the life of your family.

What's the safest stroller?

Which is the best Day Care?

How many hours will the television be turned on?

But the most significant questions,
the ones that get right down to your core values,
are the ones being asked today.

Sometimes there is so much going on during a Christening
that we forget the huge significance
that lives are being shaped, molded, blessed, refocused.

I have to tell you, in case you haven't connected all the dots,
this service is much more about Gross National Happiness
than about Gross National Product.

It's not about "having two more of these."

It is more about forgiveness, love, peace.

It is more about our promise to work harder for dignity, justice, respect and love.

Our Bible lesson today nailed it.

My brothers and sisters, if you do not abide in love, you abide in death.

My brothers and sisters, let us love not just in word and speech,
but in truth and action.

Let our lives show that we have been re-made, re-born.

I know you are living incredibly busy, productive, exciting lives.

But have you ever stopped to ask this defining question?

Who am I? What will bring me uncomplicated happiness?

I'm very hopeful that as we walk together, here, week by week,
the answers will take on a new clarity.