

Sermon 21 May 2023 The Meaning of Life

Ephesians 3:14-21 John 17:1-9

This passage, which incidentally, leads into the passage we looked at last week, sees Jesus praying for his disciples. The first thing to note, is that this prayer comes just before he is arrested and then subsequently crucified. It is a kind of closing reflection on his work and he is also praying for his disciples as they face a future of carrying out the work he has begun, but without Jesus at their side.

Jesus begins by acknowledging God's glory which has been honoured through his ministry, though what he has been able to do in the three years of his ministry. *'I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do.'* It is interesting to note that Jesus was able to promote God's glory because the people, in this case the disciples, responded accordingly. *'For the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you.'*

Glory is not possible if people don't respond favourably. If a church is to reflect anything of God's glory, it has to come from the people – how we relate to one another and we relate to those in our community and beyond. The responsibility lies with each one of us as individuals, but more of that shortly.

Jesus goes on to pray for his disciples. The mission they have ahead of them is massive – to carry on Jesus' work and to establish his church in the world. In the same way, the mission ahead of us all is significant; the time for mission is ripe. I say that because there is a lot of pain out there at the moment. People are hurting – they are hurting financially but there also seems to be a lot of frustration, I would even venture to call it anger, at what appears to be the lack of a common understanding of what direction we should be following as a community and country, and what is best for us. I find that very sad.

What also makes me sad is that as a church we could be, should be going some way to filling that vacuum. At the moment we are not, and one of the main reasons for this is that church is not a priority for the vast majority of our population. The numbers of people attending church, let alone professing to possess a faith, continue to fall. That makes me very sad. It makes me sad because I believe those people are missing out on something very significant and important, and therefore as a society we are missing out.

I say that because the religion I subscribe to, the religion that embraces Jesus Christ, tells me I need to care for my fellow human being, no matter whom they might be. Now we are getting warm as we reflect on the theme of today's service – 'the meaning of life'. This is a ginormous question, to put it mildly. As we ask ourselves, just what is the meaning of life, let me ask a question – If you feel happy and fulfilled, surely you have discovered the meaning of life? What could be more meaningful? So what is the secret to being happy and fulfilled?

To put it simply, it is through our relationships and also through what we do for others, and this is what I want to focus on for a minute. I challenge anyone to genuinely feel fulfilled through focusing on their own wants and aspirations rather than the welfare of others. I have seen countless happy giving and generous people but I don't think I have ever seen a happy selfish and mean-spirited person, which is precisely why Jesus tells 'to love our neighbour.' Everyone's a winner, both the receiver and, just as importantly, the giver.

So by subscribing to this Christian ethic, and very importantly, by doing this as self-professed Christians, we are not only doing our little bit to promote God's glory, to contribute in our own small way to God's kingdom, we are also taking a major step towards that goal of feeling happy and fulfilled. In other words, we are discovering the meaning of life.

I said before that if a church is to reflect something of God's glory, the responsibility lies with us as individuals. What are we each going to do about it? Are we each going to play our part?

In order to answer that, I want to firstly reflect on the words of Rick Warren, well-known American pastor and author, who wrote, *'Without God, life has no purpose, and without purpose, life has no meaning.'* Purpose leads to meaning. I mentioned before that as well as in what we do for others, we find fulfilment in relationships. Surely, the ultimate relationship has to be with God. I could spend a whole sermon on exploring the justification for that statement, but for the moment let's just take that as a given. Let me share a story with you.

Many years before Abraham Lincoln was elected president, he was a store-keeper in Salem, Illinois. Abe had a rifle displayed in his store that was one of the most beautiful rifles ever made. The barrel was made from the finest steel, the stock from the best walnut wood; and a world-famous gunsmith had assembled the gun. The price was extremely reasonable. Displayed next to this attractive gun was a rack of ordinary Kentucky squirrel rifles. These long-barrel rifles were made from ordinary gun steel, and plain wooden stocks. Yet, the price was higher.

A customer entered the store looking for a new rifle. He was impressed by the fine-looking gun, but was confused as to why it was priced much lower than the less attractive rifles. Abe explained that the good-looking rifle was for show, while the others were for shooting. The pioneer bought the Kentucky squirrel rifle.

A little while later, a rich farmer was decorating a room in his country mansion. He wanted to place a gun over the fireplace mantle with his big game trophies. Abe's fancy gun was exactly what he needed. The fact that it would not shoot was irrelevant. The purpose of the gun had changed.

God has given each of us a purpose, too. We can choose to work for God's glory and make disciples for Christ, or we can choose to be decorations in the church. What purpose are we each serving in our relationship with Christ? If we believe that a relationship with God has to be the ultimate relationship, it is through Christ that we discover and experience that relationship. Jesus himself said, *'I am the way, the truth and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me.'* John 14:6.

Paul puts it well in our first reading, *'I pray that you may have the power to comprehend what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.'*

Let me finish with a story I have shared with you in the past and which illustrates what we are driving at in terms of the meaning of life.

A young orphan girl had no family and no one to love her. One day, feeling exceptionally lonely and sad, she was walking through a meadow when she noticed a small butterfly caught in a thorn bush. The more the butterfly struggled, the deeper the thorns cut into its fragile body. The young orphan girl carefully released the butterfly from its captivity. Instead of flying away, the butterfly changed into a beautiful fairy. The young girl rubbed her eyes in disbelief.

'For your wonderful kindness,' the good fairy said, 'I will grant you one wish.' The little girl thought for a moment and then replied, 'I want to be happy.' The fairy said, 'Very well then,' and she leaned forward and whispered in her ear. The fairy then vanished.

As the little girl grew up, there was no one in the land as happy as she. Everyone asked her the secret of her happiness. She would only smile and answer, 'The secret of my happiness is that I listened to a good fairy when I was a little girl.'

When she was old and her deathbed, her friends all gathered around her. 'Tell us,' they begged, 'tell us what the good fairy said.' The lovely old woman simply smiled and said, 'She told me that everyone, no matter how secure they might seem, no matter how old or young, how rich or poor, has need of me.'

My friends, that need is everywhere and it is in meeting that need that we find our fulfilment, our happiness and meaning for life. It is also in meeting that need that we fulfil our commitment to 'love our neighbour' and enhance our relationship with God.

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