

The purpose of life

John 2: 13-22 and I Corinthians 1: 18-25

As some of you well know, I have been facilitating a series of Lent discussions on the seven “words” that the gospels tell us Jesus spoke from the Cross. (The next discussion is tomorrow evening, and will be on the subject of same-sex marriage – you would all be welcome!) In an earlier session we looked at Jesus’ promise to the criminal being crucified on a neighbouring cross: “Today you will be with me in Paradise”. For some of us this presented a problem because the concept of an after-life seemed at odds with modern scientific evidence, and we felt the focus on the hereafter had given religion a bad press. We tended to prefer Christian Aid’s slogan - “we believe in life before death.” But we also had a disturbing sense that the less certain we are about what happens after death, the more exposed we felt to that most searching of questions this side of the grave: what is the purpose of life?

Before you get your hopes too high, let me say that I’m not going to provide a neat answer to that question this morning, but I would like us to consider it together, drawing upon the wisdom of our lectionary readings.

With the young people we considered the Old Testament reading (though we didn’t actually read it) of the Ten Commandments. I suggested that these commands define a rather generous space within which our lives are to be lived. Taken at face value it isn’t too difficult to obey these rules, but collectively they create a moral framework for society that has stood the test of time. Nevertheless, I’m sure you have heard any number of sermons digging deeper into the commandments to suggest that they are both richer and more difficult to obey than a plain reading of the text might convey. Jesus himself preached at least one such sermon, not to do away with the laws but to nuance them in such a way as to challenge the most self-righteous, and to represent them with startling efficiency and effectiveness: love God and love your neighbour as yourself. Perhaps that is the meaning of life; perhaps no more need be said.

Paul, however, had a lot more to say. More times than I care to remember I have been given this text from 1st Corinthians to preach upon, and each time I have prefaced my remarks by pointing to Acts Chapter 17. There you will find Paul in the midst of his missionary journey moving from city to city converting many as he went. But then he arrived in Athens where he engaged day by day with theologians and philosophers, Jews and Gentiles. He tried to match them at their own game, and it would appear he thought his own arguments rather clever, but at the end we are told only a few became followers. It was rather like the conference I attended in Georgia this week: a vast hall laid out for 80 people, with a buffet to feed an army, but only 7 people turned up, three of which were the consultants. The expectations having been great; the sense of let-down was even greater ... although at least there was plenty of wine to drown our sorrows!

And so Acts tells us, with honest simplicity: “after this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth”. Luke kindly omitted the words “with tail between his legs”. He had 43 miles to

clear his head. And having done so he arrived in Corinth decrying men of wisdom, decrying philosophers, decrying scholars and determined to preach only Christ crucified.

Do you see the point: stripping away the veneer, Paul distilled the essential message down to just these two words – Christ crucified. Could this be the meaning of life? If so, what does it tell us?

First of all, we need to note what Paul did not say. He did not say Christ crucified *and risen*. This form of words was to become standard in Paul's letters and theology, just as in the wider church. It was a form of words that would grow arms and legs, as theory followed metaphor as to what exactly happened during the resurrection of Jesus – and with each new theory there would be new controversy, a split in the church and centuries of argument. Of course Paul, and the early church more generally, were working their theology out as they went along, and the later emphasis on the risen Christ can certainly be seen as development or refinement of this initial gospel statement. Nevertheless, I think it is (forgive the pun) crucially important to realize that, at its core, Paul's faith was about Christ crucified.

This matters for at least two reasons: one the subject and one the object of that sentence.

- The object was the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God. It was God's participation in the depravity of human suffering and death that gave Paul hope that we humans could aspire to participation in the life of Christ.
- The subject, the one doing the crucifying, at least in Paul's mind, was himself – he who had opposed Jesus and persecuted Christians thereafter. It was in recognizing his own deep feelings of guilt that Paul could begin to accept also God's forgiveness.

In the Christian calendar the 40 days of Lent are matched by the 40 days of Easter. We need to be Lenten Christians just as much as Easter People. Christ crucified leads onto the risen Christ. Christ crucified can indeed be the meaning of life – that which sustains us through suffering and redeems us from sin and guilt. Another of Jesus' words from the cross captures this perfectly: "Father forgive them, they know not what they do."

The purpose of life is to know and to preach Christ crucified – is that it?

Well it certainly is one answer, but our reading from John's gospel gives us a different, I would say complementary response. This is another lectionary reading that I often seem to preach from, and again I have a stock way of interpreting it. (Sorry, I seem to be giving away several secrets of the preacher's trade this morning.) In all the other gospels this story of Jesus entering the temple and overturning the tables is placed at the end of his ministry, the culmination of his arguments with the religious establishment which precipitates his arrest. John, however, records this as the first event of Jesus public ministry. Why?

I think this story functions in John's gospel in much the same way that the opening paragraph of this sermon functioned. Were you listening carefully? I hoped to catch your attention with a reference to the current controversy of same-sex marriage, and then while you were still hooked, I summarized what the sermon was going to cover. John

similarly catches attention with a dramatic piece of action and points to what the whole of his book will be about. He was a bit more clever than me, because his reference to the temple being raised again in three days, not only links to the drama at the end of the gospel but (because his readers already know about the resurrection) this authenticates his depiction of Jesus as the Temple of God.

As we consider the purpose of life, this image of the temple of God might prove fruitful to us as well. John in his gospel makes much of our oneness with Jesus – in other words, if Jesus can be described as the Temple of God, we should also be temples of God, although in our case perhaps with a lower-case “t”. What might that mean for us?

Jesus’ angry outburst in the temple was motivated by the exploitation that he saw going on in the name of religion. The destruction of the temple was a common theme in the prophetic writings (e.g. Malachi 3.2) always foretold in conjunction with a condemnation of unjust practices. Equally the rebuilding of the temple (e.g. Micah 4.1) is prophesied alongside a return to righteousness and peace. The temple was the supreme place for encountering God; and the God encountered in the Temple was characterized by peace and justice.

So if we are ourselves are to be temples of God, then we too must be people in whom peace and justice is encountered. As the prophet Micah goes on to ask rhetorically: “What is it that the Lord asks of you: only to act justly, to love loyalty, to walk wisely before your God” (Micah 6.8).

Is this sufficient to be described as the Purpose of Life? Well, it certainly resonates with John Wesley’s call to Christian perfection. There’s always room for improvement, always a new challenge around the corner calling for our renewed commitment to social and scriptural holiness, to God’s justice and peace. It’s a lifetime’s task, and one which we can never exhaust regardless of how far we journey or how well we have travelled.

When Paul said that he would preach only Christ crucified, I fancy he was marvelling at Jesus’ ability to personify the God of peace and justice, to be the Temple of God, even to the point of being hung on a cross to die. And I fancy that Jesus had that self-same sense when on the cross he uttered the words “it is accomplished” – he had been true to his calling until the end, and that gave him a sense of accomplishment even in his time of anguish. And I fancy that if we, at the end of our days, can utter those same words, then we too will have found the Purpose of Life.

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