

Transcript of Bishop Christopher's Video Sermon for February 2021

(on Principal Service Readings 2nd Sunday before Lent: Colossians 1.15-20 and John 1.1-14)

Introduction: the Word bringing life

I am really glad to be with you this morning for our time together. I am going to be thinking particularly of our Gospel reading from John, with some reference to the reading from Colossians. But I begin with the opening of the Bible. The book of Genesis first chapter one, verse one,

'In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.'

Now John's Gospel begins in a way that is reminiscent of that first creation.

'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.'

Common themes there at the beginning of the Bible, the story of the first creation, and now in John with the story of the new creation. In Genesis we have God's Word which speaks light into being. 'Let there be light'. And as the light comes into being everything happens life comes. And then in John a very similar sequence, the Word who is with God. The Word who is God, there in the beginning speaks and speaks life into being. And that life is the life of all people. In John's Gospel, the Word is the light. The Word is the means by which God creates all things. God speaks life into being. And as the chapter goes on this Word of God, this creative power, principal, reality that brings all things into being comes flesh in Jesus Christ and God as the Word lives with us.

This is why Colossians describes Jesus Christ as the one through whom all things have come into being. Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. And the way in Acts Jesus is describes as the 'Author of life'. Colossians goes on to explain, and John's Gospel is a long narrative about how this Word who becomes flesh 'reconciles', Paul says, 'all things to himself'. The Word for John, the Word who becomes flesh through whom all things are reconciled to God is the reason for John writing the gospel. He says right at the end of his gospel, this Word has brought life to all things. He says I have written this book, this gospel, so you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and 'that believing you may have life in his name. *Believing you may have life in him.* That's what he writes his Gospel for, because he knows that this Word God brought all things into being through, this Word has become flesh in Jesus Christ, so life is present to us in Jesus.

Life from three angles

What I would like to do know is just spend a bit of time thinking about this fundamental gift that God has given to us through God's Word of life. The gift of Life. Henry David Thoreau,

a nineteenth century, slightly eccentric American, great thinker, had an ambiguous relationship with Christianity. The Christianity he had been brought up with gave him the impression that 'there is nowhere recorded a simple irrepressible satisfaction with the gift of life'. That was his impression of the Bible. But nothing could be further from the truth. Life is at the very heart of the Bible. It runs through the pages of scripture.

In the first letter to Timothy the writer says, 'take hold of these things so you may take hold of life. Of the life that really is life.' And of course, in John's Gospel Jesus says 'I have come so that you may have life in all its fullness'. Not just existence but life in all its fullness. What I'd like to do is to look at this gift of life from three different perspectives. Three dimensions as it were of this gift of life, and show how this category of life gives Christians common cause with others, and yet gives us something very distinctive, a distinctive perspective. A perspective that comes through what the Bible tells us about life, life given to us by God. Life that Jesus comes to bring us into fullness. We can open people's eyes to the very source of life. To the source of, as it were, their love of life.

Life and health

The first area I would like to think about is the sheer thirst for life, the desire for life that in almost all except the most extreme of circumstances unites all human beings. We want to be alive. That might be the definition of what it means to be a human being. We want to be alive, and we will do all we can to stop disease and death defeating life.

We have seen that over these Covid months. This has given the world a common fight. This desire, this commitment of human life to hold on to life, to protect life and even the life, especially the life of the elderly and the vulnerable. Every life is valuable. Every life matters. I saw that last week very powerfully when I was visiting the hospital here in Coventry; speaking to a number of people and I was taken on to one of the Covid wards. It was just a hive of activity. Nurses and doctors and administrators buzzing around with this extraordinary commitment to save lives. This determination that they will do all in their power to save lives.

Of course, there are many Christians among them but whether Christian or not we are all joined together in seeking to promote life. As Christians we can say that their care of life, their care for life, that this urge to protect life, that this comes from God. That this is rooted in God. The God who is life, and who gives us life, and calls us to work for the preservation of life. We can say that God is the source of life. And to those wonderful health workers we can say that God is the source of life and ready to be your strength as you seek to preserve life. We can say that God declares the ultimate value of every human life by entering into human life. By becoming flesh as St John tells us of Jesus Christ. That's how much each life counts because God has lived a human life.

Life and policies that promote life

The second area I want to think about is not just preserving life through in the last instance healthcare systems, but promoting life through social policy. Policies that enable life to flourish in our societies in our community, in our world. I just want to give two areas. They are very different areas. One might say that one of those is more associated with views on the political right, and the other is more associated with views on the political left. But what I am trying to show is that they both derive from this sort of ethic of life that I am talking about, this gift of life. The basic conviction that God has given us life and wants us to live life in all its fullness.

Now as soon as I mention them, I am almost certain that I will offend and upset some people, maybe everybody, but I am going to take the risk. I know that both of these areas, like any areas of social policy, are highly complex and sensitive. I am not asking you to agree with me, but I just use them as examples of how we need – as Christians – to take our basic convictions about the gift, the beauty, the wonder of life and then find ways to apply them to the big issues of our time.

The first thing I want to say under this heading is that I think that abortion law is being abused. I think that abortion has increasingly been used in many ways as a contraceptive. As a cure for inconvenient conceptions. I think that life, the lives of the vulnerable are not being properly protected. I think that is also an affront to God. Therefore, that the law needs revising.

Now my second area is a very different one, equally controversial I should think, and that is the area of nuclear weapons of mass or total destruction that threaten millions of lives. That threaten the destabilisation of our planet. They are also, I contend, an affront to God, and they need to be eradicated before they eradicate us. And I think moreover that we should encourage the UK government to support the United Nations Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons – not just their use, but their very possession.

Now let me say again, I am taking these as examples of the need to take our fundamental Christian convictions about life and preciousness of this gift of life and work out how that applies to policies that protect life and the flourishing of life in peace and justice. I'm not saying, of course, that you need to agree with me on those particular examples, but just that this basic conviction about life needs to be translated into social policy. And we need to find ways of working with those who are promoting, and safeguarding thus gift of life seeking that we will all flourish.

Life and Spirit, life in Christ

The third area that I want to touch on is the Christian understanding of life itself as a spiritual reality. Something given to us by God. God who is Spirit. Life as something that can only fully be received spiritually as we open ourselves to God. To God the Spirit. To God's Holy Spirit. And here again we can join with others and other faith commitments, other beliefs who also affirm this. At the same time as Christians there are distinctive things we can put on the table as it were. Because as Christians we need to go further than that generalisation about the spiritual quality of life. We can get more personal as it were.

We began with John saying that this Word which brings life is the Word that became flesh. We talked about how John's purpose is that by believing in him as we read about what Jesus said and did, we will have life, life in his name. The first letter of John puts it even more starkly really.

And this is the testimony says the letter, 'God gave us eternal life and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life and whoever does not have the Son does not have life'.

These are strong claims to make. They are true to the self-definition of Jesus, 'I have come that you may have life and life in all its fullness'. Life that truly is life. This is what we claim as Christians, that this life can be found in Jesus Christ because he is the 'Author of life'. The Word through whom all things are created inhabits our life and becomes flesh.

That person I mentioned earlier Henry Thoreau said 'I did not want to live what was not life I wanted to rout out all that was not life.' The Christian claim is that the life, that true life is to be found in Jesus Christ, the 'Author of life'. The one who in John's Gospel says I am the resurrection and the life. That's why the earliest teaching of the Church that we can find in the Book of Acts puts it this way, repentance that leads to life. Repentance is simply turning to Christ. We orientate ourselves to this reality who is none other than life, ultimate life, God's life in our life.

In the big vision of John's Gospel which we see set out in chapter one this is about stepping out of the old creation and stepping into the new creation. Stepping into the new creation by keeping in step with Jesus. The One who is the Word made flesh, who is full of grace and truth. Then John goes on to say from his fullness, from Jesus' fullness of life 'we have all received grace upon grace'. That is what he means when he speaks earlier in the chapter about being given the power to become children of God. Children of God filled with the very life of God.

Conclusion – turning life, receiving life

So, to conclude, our calling as Christians is to hold on to Jesus Christ the 'Author of life'. To give thanks for and to work with all of those who work for the preservation of life in the healthcare service and every other means of care in the world. To give thanks for and work with those who promote the ways of life through their policies and business in education, in industry, in arts, and politics. And also, at the same time to share the good news that God truly has given us the gift of life. Life comes from God and that God has come into the life of the world to share this life with us. Not only to give us life but to share this life with us and bring us the reality of God's own life into the very fabric of human life. To say that Jesus is the resurrection and the life. That he is present and available to each of us as we turn to him as we seek the repentance, the *turning* that leads to life, life in all its fullness. And this is wonderful news to communicate to the world. To say again to all people, we have a great gift of life, God has come in Jesus to bring you that life. To redeem life. To reconcile us to the fullness of what life is. And then simply to receive that life that God gives us from Jesus, in Jesus, as we keep in step with him.