

**Summary of a sermon preached at Leith Valley Presbyterian Church
Sunday morning 6 May 2012**

John 10.10 - 'The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.'

This is an absolutely central verse in Scripture, summing up Jesus' ministry and the mission he left with his disciples and to us. As we have it recorded in the gospels, Jesus' whole ministry was profoundly *life-giving*, devoted to releasing people from all that hinders enjoyment of 'life in all its fullness' – physical, mental, emotional, spiritual and cultural factors – and empowering them to experience new dimensions to life. In some cases Jesus went beyond just healing and brought people back to life from the dead. The ultimate expression of his commitment to life was his own Resurrection, which we shall return to shortly.

Jesus' 'manifesto', which Luke places at the beginning of his ministry (chapter 4, our second reading) tells us to expect a very life-giving agenda: he came to preach good news to poor, pardon to prisoners, sight to blind, to see oppressed free and God's jubilee!

What strikes me powerfully about this is that his message is all-encompassing:

- (i) it had a 'personal' dimension – it was for those who came to him bowed down with sickness; guilt; a sense of lack of fulfilment; who were ostracised by their community; who were bowed down by legalism; perhaps who were exploiting (denying life to) others; and
- (ii) it had a 'communal' dimension – it showed how corporate life could be reinvigorated, demonstrated a new model of community. Jesus lived out a new way of being and relating to one another, he taught and lived 'the kingdom' or 'reign' of God, a community based on love, peace-making, sharing, justice.

And these two are inter-related: take for example:

Zacchaeus: the experience of meeting Jesus benefitted him, freed him from his life of exploiting others, offered him the opportunity to experience life in all its fullness; *and* also healed the community as he was restored to it;

the overthrowing of the money changers in the Temple: this benefitted the people who were exploited by this system, but also aimed to free the community from the 'thief who only comes to kill and destroy';

the feeding of the 4,000 and 5,000; each person there was filled with the essentials of life, but they were also bonded together into a sharing community.

These stories give us a clue to what this 'life in all its fullness' might be: It is clearly not just the opposite of death, or absence of disease, or mere survival, but a new *quality* of life, the possibility of real change, of life acquiring new meaning and purpose. It is about *metanoia*, a real turning around, see things in a totally fresh way. This is the 'life everlasting', the 'water that is not in the well' which Jesus spoke to the woman at Samaria about. It is summed up in the Hebrew word *Shalom*, which we might translate 'wholeness'.

It is important to underline this. The God whom we encounter in Scripture, in the person of Jesus, the God to whom Jesus directs us, *affirms life*. This God is the Creator of all life; the

Provider of all that we need (the fruits of the earth); the Liberator from all that restricts the full enjoyment of life (as in the Exodus); the Sustainer (e.g. through the provision of manna in the wilderness). Even the 'rules' or 'norms' God provides for his people are for our benefit: for example,

the Sabbath, sometimes used in a repressive way, is to enable individuals and communities to enjoy a better quality of life. It is a day of rest, a day to develop ourselves and our relationships, a break from work and consuming. 'The Sabbath was made to serve us, not we the Sabbath';

the Jubilee (the year of the Lord's favour), was not given for the sake of having laws but to enable society to operate on a just basis, to ensure that people were not slaves for ever, or in debt for ever, or without land for ever. It was to enable people who had fallen on hard times to be restored to their community, to ensure that 'there would be no poor among you' (Deut. 15.4), that justice is practised, that there are no people in need of 'charity', that all experience flourishing, 'fullness of life'. No wonder Liberation theologians used to speak of God as 'the God of life', pointing to the Exodus story of liberation from oppression.

But of course there are stories in the Old Testament which suggest that God is not always the author of life. The Exodus story is not complete without bloodshed, and there are several accounts in Scripture of the destruction of whole tribes. As US writer Brian McLaren has put it, 'the Canaanite genocide would have landed Joshua in a war crimes tribunal', and the flood is the very reverse of 'a cute story about furry animals on a boat ride' ('Is God Violent?', *Sojourners*, Jan 2011). There is, of course, some 'interpretation' going on here which we don't have to buy into – particularly that which may be attributed to the culture and particular understanding of the day. The Bible is inspired but, as McLaren says, it's an inspired set of stories, a library, not a seamless story, and the important thing to ask is, where God is on these occasions – to which we can reply, with the Israelites (life), not Pharaoh (death). Some have said that the most extreme 'example' of the violence of God is the Cross, but, again, where is God primarily on Good Friday? Not with the Romans banging in the nails, but with the crucified one identifying with humanity, forgiving our sin, and on Easter Sunday, in the tomb, raising him back to life again.

It's important to stress this here in NZ, because some people (and the media and insurance companies) still talk of earthquakes and other natural disasters as 'acts of God', and some have spoken of God's judgment with respect to the earthquakes in Christchurch and Canterbury. As the former Dean of Christchurch, Peter Beck, has said, 'The earthquake was not an act of God; it was the planet doing its thing the way the planet does.' And where was God in Christchurch? 'In the extraordinary way people have pulled together, have reached out to one other, in the tears of people, in the weeping, in the lament. The act of God is in the compassion people are showing to one another, the courage people are showing, in that extraordinary human spirit that is enabling us to keep together.' In other words, restoring life to the community.

I just want to say one more thing, and that is that Jesus' emphasis on offering 'life in all its fullness' showed the intensely *public* nature of his ministry. Often we hear that religion should be a private thing, especially here in 'secular' New Zealand. Indeed, a draft statement from the NZ Human Rights Commission a year or two back defined our 'secularity' in those terms. But Jesus was out to make a difference *in public*, in society: how can we understand his Luke 4 manifesto any other way? He posed a challenge to the *status quo*, to the values

and norms of his society, to the question of 'who's in and who's out', and 'who is my neighbour', the alien, the stranger. Jesus engaged with the system as he found it (e.g. moneychangers), he tackled hypocrisy, the misuse of power and authority (saving his harshest language for those guilty of this). And whether he *intended* to be socially disruptive, he was clearly perceived to be, since his manner of death, crucifixion, was that reserved for political subversives, insurrectionists (stoning was the usual penalty for religious offenders, blasphemers). And I think he calls us to do the same, to make a difference in society – for the cause of 'life'. Just as he reflects the God to whom he came to point us, so should we.

It's exciting to know that I'm talking to the converted this morning: the impact you are making and the 'life' you are bringing to the community here in NEV is palpable. I hope what I'm saying will remind you of the basis upon which you do this service and encourage you to seek fresh opportunities to offer it - because sometimes we hear voices telling us that once we become Christians our thoughts should be on higher things, that we need to escape from the world to get closer to God. Of course, there *is* a time to 'come aside and rest awhile', but primarily God calls us to engage in this world as we find it, just as *he* himself demonstrates a profound concern with it.

Some also tell us not to bother too much with this world – with climate change or global hunger, for example – because our ultimate destiny is in the 'world beyond', but the Bible really doesn't know of this. As St Paul says, it is *this world* which is to be redeemed, 'groaning to be set from its bondage to decay' (Romans 8.21), and the Book of Revelation sees the future in terms of a 'new city' and God coming down to dwell here with us, of new heavens and new earth refashioned from the old. As Jesus taught us to pray, 'thy kingdom come, thy will be done *on earth* as it is in heaven'. If we still doubt the importance of this world to God, consider the Resurrection of Jesus, which St Paul tells us is the first-fruits of the general resurrection. On one level it is 'the future', as it were, breaking into our history, but it is also a sign that the kingdom is *here*, among us - 'not yet', yes, but beginning. As Bishop Tom Wright says (in *Surprised By Hope*), the Resurrection is not to give us assurance of heaven or spiritual comfort, but to compel us to work for the kingdom which is breaking out, to bring the 'life in all its fullness' which Jesus came to announce to individuals and *our* society.

So what am I saying? Well, not that faith isn't personal: I profoundly believe that Jesus offers each one of us the possibility of new life, eternal life, through his death on the Cross. But it *cannot* be *private* – indeed, as Jim Wallis puts it, 'faith is always personal but never private'. The early disciples knew this – they were very public in their witness. Their confession 'Jesus is Lord', which sounds like a very pious statement, was dynamite in a culture in which Caesar was 'lord'! And my concern in my role at the University, directing the Centre for Theology and Public Issues, is to look critically at what we might call 'the resources of the faith', the kind of teachings we have briefly touched upon this morning, and see how they can inform debate and action around current issues, can help people and communities know that 'life in all its fullness'.

I believe that what the Bible teaches about caring for and being good stewards of creation; the priceless value of children; the importance of family life; the need for justice with respect to the poor, the orphan, the widow, the stranger; even the Sabbath and the Jubilee, gives us much to say about the issues of our day relating to, for example, the environment; crime and

punishment (think what the Zacchaeus story can teach us about the importance of recognising people's propensity to change and how communities can be strengthened and made safer when imprisonment isn't always our first resort); social disorder; the ever widening gap between rich and poor – and that we should engage in the public square with confidence. We have much to offer, and there is such a need for fresh and creative thinking, for constructive and workable ideas, as we look at the issues we face today – not to mention a need for genuine, realistic *hope*, for *vision*. There's a wonderful verse in Jeremiah about 'seeking the welfare of the city' – that's what 'public theology' aims to do. So if you'd like to share stories of what you are doing, or discuss how we can be more effective as Christians in this work, or generally get involved in the work of the centre, do contact me (andrew.bradstock@otago.ac.nz).

Let me sum up what I've been trying to say with that well-known verse from Hebrews (11.1): 'faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen'. Or as Jim Wallis likes to put it, 'believing despite the evidence, then watching the evidence change'. Or as we might say, '*helping to make the evidence change*'. That's our challenge as Christians today.

Andrew Bradstock