

Message by Rev Mark Watt, EASTER 4, 3 MAY 2020 "I came that they may have life"

John 10:1-10

Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. ² The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³ The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵ They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers." ⁶ Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

⁷ So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸ All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹ I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. **I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.**

SERMON

Over the years I have had a lot of people quote different Bible passages to me in order to describe faith. One thing that I have learned is that it is sometimes hard to get people to agree which is the most appropriate verse to describe our Christian faith. For me the issue is:

Which single line best sets out the reason why Jesus came among us?

That line would need to clarify what Jesus accomplished through his life and ministry.

Perhaps some people would argue for Ephesians 2:8 - - *"for it is by God's grace that you have been saved through faith. It is not the result of works, but God's gift."*

Or would it be Galatians 3:11 - *"Only the person who is put right with God through faith shall live."*

If you prefer to start out looking at how Jesus came to break the power of sin then perhaps Romans 6:6 - *"and we know that our old being has been put to death with Christ on his cross, in order that the power of the sinful self might be destroyed, so that we should no longer be slaves of sin."*

Taking this idea further we might like to indicate that Colossians 3:5 shows that Jesus came to get rid of sin - *"You must put to death the earthly desires at work in you, such as sexual immorality, indecency, lust, evil passions, and greed."*

But there is more. John 13:34 suggests that Jesus was a teacher who came to set out clearly for us 'God's Law.' - *"And now I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another,"*

Matthew 22:39 simply says: *"Love your neighbour as you love yourself."*

Of course there are some people who want to look at their faith on the basis of political and social justice issues bringing about the necessary reforms within our society and the world. Perhaps for them Luke 4:18 suits best: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has chosen me to bring good news to the poor,"* as well as Luke 18:22 - *"Sell all you have and give the money to the poor, and you will have riches in heaven; then come and follow me."*

As you can see every one of these passages has some significance and there is no way that I would try to diminish their significance. However they do not fully set out the depth and breadth of Jesus ministry. Perhaps we are better off with the end of the passage from John's Gospel today: *"I have come in order that you might have life - life in all its fullness."*

Another passage that I appreciate is the very well-known and often quoted John 3:16: *"For God loved the world so much that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life."* For this one to have impact we need to clearly understand the implications of 'believe' and 'eternal.' It is just too easy to slip over them without comprehending their importance. The word 'believe' involves more than just simplistically putting our name to some doctrinal statement and the word 'eternal' is more about quality than some period of time.

If we compare the passages I think that: *"I have come in order that you might have life - life in all its fullness."* seems to have more depth. The others drift into simply looking at personal salvation, breaking the power of sin, renewing human communities and looking at religious and social justice.

Commandment style statements about doing away with greed and immorality can be seen as threatening and onerous until we acknowledge them as simply obstacles to us being opened up to the beauty of life's fullness. Rather than being obsessed with morality, Jesus was seeking to bring about life in all its fullness and the moral issues are just addressed as a means to that end.

As we consider these issues let me be clear that I am not trying to down-grade some very important things. Trying to suggest that the fullness of life comes in ahead of salvation from sin, or that the fullness of our life supersedes social justice, may cause

some people to be feeling very uncomfortable. However, as we dig deeper we can start to see where Jesus is leading us. He is not fixated on 'fixing problems'. Salvation, social justice and morality are all parts of the solution. These things come into their own only when there is a person who needs to be protected from danger.

When things have gone wrong then salvation is about correcting the situation. Social justice only comes into play when there is injustice in the world. If there was no injustice in the world we would never have needed the words 'social justice.' If we were never faced with the pain and brokenness caused by immoral behaviours we would never need to think about morality. It is clear that Jesus is involved in putting things right in our world however we should pray for those actions not to be needed in the first place.

So we return to the discussion about what is Jesus message. For me it is 'life – life in all its fullness.' The world came about because God loves life and loves to bring life into a blessed and fulfilling state. We were not created to do the wrong thing by one another. Let me try to clarify this for you with an story:

Jill loves gardening but she does not plant her garden because she is especially passionate about removing snails and pulling out weeds. The aim of the garden is not to attract snails so that she can have fun removing them. She removes snails because she loves the garden and gets great joy from watching it grow and flourish. Her removal of snails is to ensure that the flourishing growth is not hindered, it is not the purpose of the exercise in itself.

Taking this concept further I would suggest that Christ's struggles with injustice and immorality are along the same lines as Jill's attempts to tackle the snails. The idea is to remove any obstacle to creation growing and flourishing. God's primary passion is that everyone and everything should be able to thrive unhindered without any threat to the fullness of the promised life.

The Biblical concept here is a world which is a dynamic growing experience. So many of us seem to look to a static picture where there is no room for beauty to blossom and flourish. God's world is not static and unchanging. Let me take you back to Jill's garden:

The perfect garden would not be one where the perfect flowers just stayed in bloom all the time and nothing ever happened. The perfect garden would grow and flourish and be born and mature and fade and blossom again in the cycles of nature. The big difference would be that it would maintain a balance in its cycles so that even the snails would have a place and wouldn't get out of hand. The flourishing of life would be so overflowing and abundant that the demise of one plant would be celebrated as the giving of life of another rather than mourned as the victory of death in the garden.

In a perfect world we would not be in a static holding pattern. We would not be sitting on puffy clouds playing harps. We would be constantly growing and developing and maturing as we enjoy all the goodness and freedom of a fulfilling life. In this environment love and blessings do not have limits. They are things which evolve and mature and flourish while always changing and developing. For me love is not something which rises to a plateau and then becomes boringly static and unchanging.

The fullness of life that Christ came to open up for us is like that. It is a diverse, flourishing, exuberant life in which we are increasingly aware and appreciative of the beauty and joy and magical fullness of any given moment.

"I have come in order that you might have life - life in all its fullness."

BENEDICTION

Go out and listen for the voice of the Good Shepherd. Know that when he calls, you will recognise him;

for Christ always calls us to the place of love,

to the place of hope, even in the midst of darkness.

Go in God's grace and with God's blessing. In the name of the one who calls us.
Amen.