

Sunday 21 March 2021

A sermon preached by the Revd Stephen Ames, at St Paul's Cathedral on the Fifth Sunday of Lent:

Readings: [John 12:20-33](#)

The Dean reminded us last week, that this Lent, in this Cathedral, the sermons are about words to live by. Let's begin.

I

Jesus says firstly that those who love their life will lose it and secondly, those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

Are these words to live by?

For many people, these words just confirm how much Christianity's God is world denying, humanity denying. The idea of hating your life in this world so as to keep it for eternal life, used to be summarized as "pie in the sky when you die." This has long been rejected as words to live by.

This misunderstands Jesus' words on several counts. Here are two. The first concerns the words love and hate. Love this life or hate this life. These are terms representing a choice, a commitment, as to where you stand. It is like St Paul quoting the book of Malachi, which has God saying, "Jacob I loved, and Esau I hated." It speaks of God's choice.

The second misunderstanding is about the word 'world'. In John's Gospel it has two meanings. The first, is that the word 'world' means God's good creation, which comes into being through the Word that was with God in the beginning and is God. This Word became flesh and tabernacled amongst us in Jesus.

The second meaning of the word 'world' is the way humankind has used its God-given powers to variously organize its life apart from God. In chapter 3 of John, we learn that the Light had come into the world, but people preferred darkness because they didn't want their evil deeds to be exposed.

That preference includes the ways religions can sometimes organize their life apart from God. We know this most recently from the Royal Commission into institutional sexual abuse and the way church leadership had often covered up clerical abuse of children.

You may also recall Bob Derenbacker's explanation of what Jesus did by overturning the tables of the money changers. Jesus was not cleansing the Temple, but rather, enacting a judgement on it, that its time was over. The judgement was fulfilled in AD 70 when the Roman Legions destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple.

So, according to Jesus, if you love your life in this world, meaning if you love any of the many ways life can be organized apart from God, you will lose it.

On the other hand, Jesus says, if we hate our life in this world, meaning if we choose not to order our life apart from God, we will keep it to eternal life.

Are these words to live by?

II

Those who love their life in this world, meaning those who order their lives apart from God, will lose it.

The oldest way to order one's life apart from God is by being self-centred – always attending to how to protect or promote one's self, including opportunities to be the center of attention.

Other ways life is organized apart from God is by deeply engrained social assumptions. One example is recalled in 2021, the thirtieth anniversary of the report of the 1991 Royal Commission into the deaths of Aboriginal people in custody, deaths that are more numerous now than thirty years ago. This is one effect of the violent dispossession of the land, and of life, justified by the powerful fiction of terra nullius. A whole way of life flourished under this fiction. This is deeply engrained racism.

Another way life is lived apart from God is assumptions about the relationship between men and women widely lived by men in power, shown in the sexual demeaning and assaulting of women. This is the powerful fiction of patriarchy, which is both promoted and yet challenged by the Bible.

A third example is life centered on the golden rule – those who have the gold make the rules and the first rule is make more gold, whatever it takes. This has led to the global economy in which anything can be turned into a commodity, in ever-expanding markets.

I am sure you will think of other examples of the way anyone's life can be organized apart from God.

If I am right in this interpretation, Jesus is saying those who live in such ways and enjoy the benefits of them, love the world organized apart from God, and they will lose their life.

I want to mention two objections to what I have been saying about loving your life in this world.

Firstly, I know a very articulate man, a life-long Anglican, a scientist, who is well known in the diocese, who would strongly deny that the global market is organized apart from God. He would say that God is working through the markets, that are raising hundreds of millions of people out of poverty. He thinks God has provided the earth with resources so that everyone can live well, indeed live like we do in the West.

I agree, God has provided the blessings of the earth and equipped humankind with great powers so that everyone can live well. But that is not an endorsement of how we live. Three planet earths would be needed for everyone to live as we do, and then there is the waste. Yes, hundreds of millions of people lifted out of poverty is good, but is far too few compared to what is needed and possible. In any case it isn't the point of the global economy with its golden rule: those who have gold make the rules and the first rule is make more gold, which concentrates more and more wealth in fewer hands.

The second objection is that we can see how many, many people do good things for others, give back to the community, are creative and inventive and say that they love their work and their lives, while opposing the kind of disorders I have just mentioned. And they do all this

without any thought of God or Jesus. Is Jesus really saying they will lose their lives? Is that what we want to say to them?

Here I would take care because St John tells us that those who abide in love abide in God. He also says that those who do the truth come to the light. In today's gospel reading, Jesus even says that when he is lifted up on the cross, he will draw all people to himself.

I prefer to think of the people we are considering in these terms, even though God is hidden from them. After all, that is an old theme. If I had the opportunity to speak with them, I would want to discuss things about daily love that are signs of God already present to them. Secondly, I would ask whether they had considered Jesus presented in the Gospels. My only concern would be if they pulled back from the possibility of God already being present to them albeit incognito. If so, I would ask what that was about.

III

Jesus says, if we hate our life in this world, meaning if we choose not to order our life apart from God, we will keep it to eternal life.

Of course, we can only not choose to live a life organized apart from God because we do choose to live another way that is centered on God. According to Jesus, he is that other way.

So, what shall we say about Jesus and the other way that he offers?

In my lectures in the subject God and the Natural Sciences at the University of Melbourne, students ask me why I am a Christian rather than something else.

I explain there is no neutral space where anyone could answer such a question. I go on to say I am a Christian because I could not worship a God who could not suffer. On one occasion, a student shouted out "Why should God suffer?" I prayed under my breath, "Kyrie Eleison!" Here is what I said aloud.

Jesus the divine Son become flesh has come into the world and here God establishes an opening into the life of God. Everyone is invited into this opening. It is for everyone. But amazingly this provokes very different reactions. His disciples don't understand what he is about, nor do the adoring crowds, nor do the authorities, who want to get rid of him. But Jesus keeps on; he keeps on keeping the opening open, right up to when he is crucified. But then God raised him from the dead. Thereby the opening remains open but is transformed and expanded by his resurrection because the whole created universe is going to be drawn into this opening. Everyone is called and invited to enter and live their life now by abiding in this opening. God suffered to keep the opening open.

The student's face lit up at this answer.

God establishes in the world an opening into the life of God through Jesus. This opening was not available prior to Jesus or apart from Jesus, for he said that only the Son knows the Father and those to whom the Son reveals him.

In this opening we are given access to the Father through the Son in the power of the Spirit. This power of the Spirit is at work in our hearing the Gospel, in our baptism and in our participation in the Eucharist, and in our participation in the mission of the church in the world.

The Spirit re-locates us in this opening. This relocation doesn't take us out of the world. No, we are in the world because this opening into God is in the world, but we are not of the world, because the opening is not something the world can bring about. It is from above.

In this opening we are embraced by God's pure unbounded self-sacrificial love. In this opening we are surrounded and pervaded by all the energies, powers, and blessings of the divine life. Each of us is to be attuned to his opening, to learn to pick up the movements of the divine energies and to trust where we are being drawn and driven by the Spirit.

A poor analogy would be our being surrounded and pervaded by electromagnetic radiation which we now pick up with the help of smart phones or in the old days our TVs, or even older our radios, including for me the little crystal set I learned to make at the local boys' club and could hardly believe the magic of the first time it worked.

We can fully give ourselves to this opening and discover this divine love coming alive in our interior life which we are then to share in all we do. This is something we have to learn, because each of us carries a lot of 'noise' within us, which is healed by becoming attuned to the energies of the divine life. So, there will be times in our lives when the signal to noise ratio is more about the noise than the signal.

This opening of the divine life to the whole creation is made possible by the pure unbounded, love of the Triune God, the self-sacrificial love that has been opened to the world through Jesus the incarnate divine Son.

We are standing in this opening; we abide in this opening. This is imperishable life already. These are words to live by.