

Life That Finds Us

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 22 June 2014, by David Gill. The readings were Genesis 21:8-21 and St Matthew 10:24-39

If you can, cast your mind back half a century. Can you recall what happened to this country in mid-June 1964? The Beatles happened, that's what. The fabulous four descended on Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney. With their arrival, Australia went berserk. Beatlemania reigned throughout the land. It was Justin Bieber, on steroids, raised to the power of ten.

Now, I'm not going to embarrass my congregation by asking who attended the Beatles' performances. Some of you must have been there, screaming your lungs out in those vast crowds of hysterical teenage fans. They were fun days. The Beatles' music appealed. The message of that music appealed even more. And nothing had stronger appeal than what became their principal theme song.

Remember it? "All you need is love. That is all you need." So go for love. You will surely find it. And life will be wonderful. The message was clear, simple, singable and hope-filled.

There was, however, just one small problem, as those screaming teenagers were to discover with the passing of the years. Life doesn't work that way. Life – and love, in particular -- is rarely clear, it's never simple, it may be singable but many of the hopes we have for it eventually bite the dust.

Some hopes, of course, are achievable. We heard about them, ad nauseam, in the pious exhortations that were inflicted upon us at high school speech days. Remember those platitudes that were served up to us? "You can do anything you like, be anything you like, if you work at it".

You can become a rocket scientist or a brain surgeon, if you're prepared to invest the time, energy and money it requires. You can win gold at the Olympics, if you have that kind of physique and determination. You can become prime minister of Australia, though why anyone would want to I cannot imagine. [Of course you can't become our head of state, unless you were born into a particular family in a foreign country on the other side of the world, but we won't get into that debate now!]

The point is, what those boring speakers told us in high school is largely true. Most of the things people hanker after are, in principle anyway, attainable.

But some are not. Think love. Think happiness. Think some of the other very basic things we mortals crave. The formula “go for it and you’ll surely find it” doesn’t always hold true. In fact, that neat little slogan is quite seriously flawed.

Why? Because what we yearn for in life often seems forever beyond us. You want happiness? It is always one step ahead of you. Wealth? There will never be sufficient. Power? No power-hungry dictator has ever been satisfied. Security? Just when you think you have it, it’s gone. Pleasure? There’s never quite enough. Love? Ah yes, love especially. Set out to *acquire* love, and all you’ll end up with is a crippling preoccupation with self that holds you back from fullness of life with others. Pursue any of these things for its own sake, and somehow it will always escape you.

Yet, strangely enough, when we don’t chase one of these things for its own sake, when we orient our lives elsewhere, what we had been yearning for often arrives anyway. We don’t find happiness. Happiness finds us. We don’t grasp love. Love grasps us.

One of the most remarkable women I’ve ever met was a Carmelite nun from the Philippines. She was working in East Timor in June 1999, when things were tense. The East Timorese were preparing to vote on whether to go it alone or remain part of Indonesia. It was a dangerous time, with pro-Indonesia militia groups running wild. Violence, some of it random, was being used by elements within the Indonesian army to destabilise and intimidate. Parts of the province had already become no-go areas for humanitarian aid organisations.

That was where the good sister came in. Each morning, down on the coast, she would load medical supplies and food into her back-pack. Then she would set out into the hills, climbing through militia-controlled areas to reach a concentration of internally displaced people inland from the town of Liquica. They were cut off from all help. Even the UN dared not go there. But she went, daily, marching through the militia’s lines armed only with that back-pack and a wonderful, sunny smile.

One of the happiest people I’ve ever met. But I cannot imagine that woman had ever planned her life to acquire happiness. Her daily routine was hardly what most people would see as one of bliss. It was certainly not one of ease. She was spending her life – indeed, risking her life every day – for others. And, clearly, she was having a ball.

Which brings us to Jesus' words we heard a few minutes ago. "Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it". At one level, this is simply restating the general truth we've just noted about seeking and finding.

But in the 10th chapter of St Matthew's gospel, the Lord is being more specific. Jesus is preparing his followers for difficult days ahead. He tells them to orient their lives towards the rule of God. They must expect ridicule and contempt, hatred and violence. Even the awesome power of family relationships will be affected. But do not be afraid, he tells them. The God who cares about falling sparrows will not forget you.

Then, in words echoed in all four gospels, we are presented with the paradox. If you are intent on chasing your life and hanging on to it, that's not going to work. It's a no-win game, says Jesus. You will lose the very thing you want. But loosen your hold on life for the sake of God's rule, for the sake of what I represent and what I'm trying to teach you, for the sake of the new age that is dawning, and surely you will find it.

You have heard me before refer to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a young Lutheran pastor and theologian who was martyred for his opposition to Hitler. After a decade of trying to get German Christians to challenge Nazism and all it represented, he had been identified as part of a circle of dissidents who were working for the regime's overthrow.

Arrested by the Gestapo in 1943, Bonhoeffer was detained in Berlin's Tegel military prison, then Buchenwald, then Flossenburg concentration camp in Bavaria. There, following the emergence of new evidence implicating him, Pastor Dietrich was tried by a drumhead court-martial on 8 April 1945. At dawn the following morning he was hanged, just two weeks before allied troops liberated the camp and four weeks before Germany capitulated. A few days previously, knowing what lay ahead, he had asked a British fellow-prisoner to convey a message to Bishop George Bell, one of the friends in the Church of England with whom he had kept in contact. His message? "This is the end -- for me, the beginning of life".

A few months later, a memorial service for Bonhoeffer took place in England. It began with the well-known hymn "For all the saints, who from their labours rest". Bishop Bell preached on the very passage we heard this morning,

including the words “Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it”.

Bonhoeffer and that Carmelite sister leave us struggling to understand. Their stories read like case studies of Jesus’ sermon on the mount, where those who lose everything are blessed, the meek inherit the earth, people who hunger for righteousness are fed, the merciful receive mercy and those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake inherit the kingdom.

Everything is turned upside down. That’s the rule of God for you. It draws people into a radically new way of seeing and doing in which the normal is reversed, the conventional is overthrown, the expected is overtaken by surprise, and evil is disempowered.

That’s what the man Jesus -- his life and teachings, his death and rising – was on about. Not founding a Jesus of Nazareth Fan Club, but living and getting others to live for a new day that was dawning. It seemed crazy to people then. It seems crazy to us, still. Yet in that gospel craziness is to be found the vital clue to life, life that is worth living, life that endures.

There is a wonderful prayer I’ve quoted before from this pulpit. It has been attributed, falsely, to Mother Theresa but the real source remains unknown. There are several different versions, but the essence of the prayer goes like this.

Lord,

When I am hungry, give me someone to feed.

When I am thirsty, give me someone whose thirst I may assuage.

And when I am cold, someone to warm.

When I am sad, give me someone to cheer.

When I need understanding, send me someone who needs mine.

When my burden is heavy, give me also those of others.

And when I need love, may others ask for mine.

When I think only of myself, draw my thoughts to another.

May your will be my food,

your grace my strength,

and your love my rest.

May my whole life be a gift perpetually offered to you, O Father,

until the day when you are pleased to receive it back again.

Amen Lord, Amen