



Sermon: - 18th March 2018

What on earth are you doing, for heaven's sake

Jeremiah 31: 31-34; John 12: 20-33

Have you noticed how fashionable it is to love your life! If you Google the phrase you will get 2,440 million results. They relate to things like "Love Your Life: 100 Ways to Start Living the Life You Deserve." Or, "33 Simple Ways to Fall Back In Love With Your Life", which is a website containing the tagline: It happens to the best of us – life starts to stagnate and drag. When our day-to-day routine starts feeling more like a never-ending chore, it can be all too easy to forget that our lives require our active participation in order to stay fresh and exciting. So, for the times when you're feeling disenamored with your everyday routine here are 33 simple methods of falling in love with it all over again. It seems that in today's society if you don't love your life there's something wrong with you, and there are plenty of people out there trying to tell you how to fix it. The business of self-improvement is big business. You can have a personal trainer, or a life coach, and if you look in any bookshop you'll see that the number of self-help books increases with every year that passes.

And yet, in today's gospel reading Jesus tells us, "Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life." So, what does that mean? I think that this verse is one of those verses that many of us struggle with. Life is a gift from God, and we should be thankful for it, we are thankful for it.

We want to enjoy our life, and in John 10:10 we are told that Jesus said, "I came that they may have life, and have it to the full." That doesn't sound like something we would hate! Yet Jesus tells us to hate our life, and these two statements don't quite seem to marry up. He tells us that if we love our life we will lose it, yet he has come to bring us a full life. So how do we marry our rightful gratefulness for being alive, our gratitude for the things that we have that God has given us, our talents and gifts, the ability to earn money to create a comfortable home, the friends and relations who brighten our days, all these blessings, and the promise of Jesus that we shall have a full life, how do we marry that with this suggestion that in fact we should hate our life?

Perhaps the place to start is to ask what kind of life society considers is one we can "Love". There is a clue in all those self-help websites and books. They are all about satisfying our own desires.

“Dress for success”, or “get away once a month”, for example. Sometimes these desires may be dressed up as altruism, they may masquerade as being for the good of others. So, for example, that website I mentioned suggests that we “practice forgiveness” or “train ourselves to see the best in people”. These are good things to do, but when the aim of doing them is our own selfish gratification – to make our life better, so that we love our life more, is that still a such good thing?

Jesus contrasts “loving” and “hating” our life, and “losing” and “keeping” our life. Loving our life, in the world’s terms, it would seem according to those websites is living a life of self-gratification, a life that makes us happy. The phrase, “live the life you deserve” is a mantra for our day, as if we deserve good things by right and we don’t have to do anything to earn at. That philosophy could not be further from the truth of the gospel. If we live that life, Jesus says, in other words, if we live a worldly life, we will not get to heaven, but if we hate our worldly life, if we live an otherworldly life, we will have eternal life. That makes some kind of sense, but hate is a strong word. Does God really want us to hate our life on earth? How would we do that? Perhaps not in the way we think. In the gospel of John, the word that John uses for “hate” means “reject”. Normally when John uses this word he is referring to the way world reacts to Jesus and, of course, by extension, to his disciples. So, when Jesus says, “Those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life” he is encouraging his disciples, and us, to follow his lead in hating (or rejecting) this world’s definition of life. We should also take note of the metaphor that Jesus uses here. He compares his life to a seed, which, unless it is planted in the ground, or dies, remains a single seed. The life of a single seed is a small and isolated existence. Jesus is determined that his life will not fail to bear fruit. He will go to his death in order that his life will produce many seeds. In the same way his disciples should not grasp and hold the seed that is their life, thereby failing to bear much fruit. What he is saying, for us to pay attention to, is that, by living a life according to the world’s standards, and by trying to hang on to our own happiness, we remain isolated and our lives mean nothing. Jesus is asking us to reject a worldly life in favour of an otherworldly life. But, if we seek an otherworldly life, reject a worldly life, we become part of a bigger movement which will have implications for the good of humanity far beyond what we could achieve as individuals. So, at this point, so far, it seems that Jesus wants us to reject a worldly life, and in embracing a life which is lived according to his standards, not only will we be happier and more fulfilled, but we will have a good effect on our community.

However, what does it mean to reject a worldly life? Jesus was prepared to die but clearly, he doesn’t expect us to follow his example to that extent in the normal course of things, although

people have, on occasion, sacrificed themselves for others to this extent and that is unimaginably brave. However, for most of us, that would achieve nothing. His death had a purpose. We imagine, I think, that giving up our life means giving up everything the world has to offer. Perhaps suffering for our faith. At its most extreme we might believe that giving up everything the world has to offer means becoming a monk or nun. Entering full-time Christian service at the least. Eschewing the things of this world completely. But I think there are many ways of rejecting a worldly life and living an otherworldly life. I think that what it means to reject a worldly life is something that each of us has to work out for ourselves. I believe that it won't mean the same thing for each of us here. For example, it might mean that we prioritise prayer in our lives. It might mean that we give a significant proportion of our time, or of our talents, or of our money to the work of the church. It might mean that the way we go about our daily business is different: more dedicated, more selfless, more prepared to go the extra mile, less concerned about our rights and more concerned about our responsibilities. It might mean that our priorities are focused more on the good we can do than the advantages that we can gain. But one thing I do think it means, and that is that God will guide us into what it means for each of us as individuals. We cannot presume to know what God is speaking into the heart of another.

Our abundant life, our life lived to the full, the seed that is my life and your life, when offered up to God, becomes fruit for the world, but also for us. When Jesus tells us to hate our life, to reject the ways of the world, he is not inviting us to a life of misery. He is inviting us to abundant life, to a full life, to the best life.

We began by thinking about what the world means by loving our life, the world's version of the life abundant. It is an individualistic life. It is a life which self-gratification is the guiding principle. It is a life built on a lie – that we deserve to be happy. We don't deserve anything. But Jesus shows us a better way. Jesus calls us to something different. The apostle Paul wrote if anyone is in Christ they are a new creation. The old life passes away and everything becomes new. The Gospel invites us to turn away from this culture of individualism to a culture of community. The single seed, when it gives up its right to its individuality, produces many seeds. The present culture that we live in values, as sacrosanct, the principle of the right of the individual to choose. The Gospel invites the individual to choose in such a way that the whole community benefits from our choosing. It is a call to put the other at the centre of our decision making.

In Jesus we have an example of someone who rejected a worldly life right to the end, and in these days of Lent we journey with him through his hard, final days towards the cross. He chose death

that we might have life. Our life, as Paul tells us, is bought with a price. May we spend our lives wisely and well. May Jesus, in his choices, in his selflessness, in his courage and determination to live well on earth for heaven's sake, may he be an inspiration to us as well as salvation for us.