

PHIL 1.21: WHAT IS LIFE?

(Baptismal Service, Chelmsford 11/2/07)

The story is told of a Texas oil millionaire, who specified in his will that he wanted to be buried in his Cadillac car. So when he died, the undertakers prepared to carry out his instructions. They dug an enormous grave, they placed the Cadillac on a huge lowering device, they dressed the corpse in a colourful sports jacket, put a huge cigar in his mouth, seated him at the wheel and set the speedometer at 100 mph. The mourners then gathered round the grave. As the strange coffin was slowly lowered into the ground to the appropriate words of committal, another millionaire, looking at his dear friend, murmured with a tear in his eye: “*Man, that’s some living*”.

In fact it was the very reverse. It wasn’t living – it was dying. But we know what he meant. When we are doing something that gives us real pleasure, real satisfaction, we sometimes say: ‘*This is the life – this is really some living*’.

I wonder, when do you really come alive? When does life really seem worthwhile?

- Is it lying on some tropical beach under a blazing sun, with the sound of the ocean surf pounding in your ear, and with the sight of an occasional pretty girl walking by?
- Or is it when you are caught up in the thrill of watching a football or rugby match where the score is tied and there are only two more minutes to go?
- Or is it attending a concert, whether it be pop or classical, where the music just takes you over?

When do you really feel alive?

For the Apostle Paul it was Jesus who made him really feel alive.

Listen to him as he wrote to the Christians at Philippi: “**What is life? For me it is Christ**” (1.21). “**For me to live is Christ**” (NRSV). Literally, ‘*For me life is Christ*’.

That’s some statement.

If you didn’t know it was from the Apostle Paul, you might be excused for thinking that this came from the lips of a young enthusiastic bright-eyed Christian, who as a result of their new-found faith was exaggerating a little.

But no, this is from the lips of a middle-aged man who over the years had had his faith well and truly tested. A man who knew what was like to be hungry and thirsty, to be cold and tired, to be beaten and near to death – this is the man who challenges us with this bold confession of faith: “**For what is life? To me it is Christ**”.

This bold confession of faith becomes even more amazing, when you realise that, at that very moment as Paul was dictating this letter, he was in jail.

Indeed, he was actually chained to a Roman soldier. And still he says: “**For what is life? To me it is Christ**”!

Here incidentally we have a potent illustration of the fact that Christianity is not a philosophy, but a new way of living.

A philosophy is a way of viewing life – but the Christian faith is a way of living life.

What’s more, it is way of living life seven days a week, and not just one.

“**For me to live is Christ**”. “**Life... is Christ**”

This morning I want to view this statement from three angles.

1. LIFE BEGINS WITH CHRIST

From time to time we read in the papers of somebody who has been blind all their life, then having an operation, and all of a sudden being able to see.

What a fantastic experience that must be. Just imagine seeing the colours and shapes of the world around you for the very first time – of being able to see perhaps your partner or your child for the very first time. Life suddenly becomes altogether different. Indeed, in a very real sense it is the beginning of a new life.

Paul had a similar experience when he met Jesus on the Damascus Road.

Suddenly his whole world was turned upside down.

Suddenly his eyes were opened to a new way of living – to a life lived with Christ.

As he later reflected on that experience he wrote to the Philippians & said that as a result his previous life now counted for nothing. **“I reckon everything as complete loss for the sake of what is so much more valuable: the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord”** (Phil 3.8).

Before Paul met Jesus he had everything he could have wanted: his background and schooling had been of the best; he had excelled himself in his studies; a secure and comfortable life lay before him.

Yet compared with Christ, these advantages were worthless.

Indeed, he said that they were as ‘garbage’, only fit for the tip.

Compared to life with Jesus, the past was but an existence.

For Paul life began with Christ.

What was true of Paul, is also true of these five who will be baptised this morning.

True, they might not express themselves in quite the same way as the Apostle Paul.

Their experience of the Christian faith has been different from Paul.

Rachel & Alison were brought up in Christian homes and so had always heard of Jesus and his love. Kevin too had no Damascus Road experience.

On the other hand, for Anthony and Sean their experience of church just over three years ago was overwhelming.

And yet all of them can say that life took on a new dimension when they truly responded to the love of God in Christ.

The fact is that when we put our trust in Jesus as Saviour & Lord, we come alive in a new way. In the words of Jesus found in John’s Gospel, we are **“born again”**.

Or as Paul wrote to the church at Corinth: **“Anyone who is joined to Christ is a new being; the old is gone, the new has come”** (2 Cor 5.17). Life begins with Christ.

All of a sudden we discover that there is more to life than eating, drinking, and generally having a so-called good time.

We discover that life can have meaning, direction, purpose.

Next Sunday we begin a 40 day spiritual growth journey based on Rick Warren’s *The Purpose Driven Life*. The Bible apart, this book is the best-selling non-fiction book in history. According to the blurb, *“Knowing God’s purpose for creating you will reduce your stress, focus your energy, simplify your decisions, give meaning to your life, and most important, prepare you for eternity”*. We shall be discussing this book in small groups as well as focussing on its themes in our Sunday services.

Why don’t you become part of this spiritual growth journey and discover the new life we can have in Jesus.

2. LIFE IS LIVED IN CHRIST

Paul's favourite description of a Christian is a man or woman who is "**in Christ**".

This phrase occurs some 164 times in his writings.

It sums up the very heart of true religion for Paul. Life is lived in Christ.

Here we have a reminder that Christian faith centres on a person rather than a creed.

Christian faith involves entering a relationship with Jesus.

So Paul contrasting his present life with his old life wrote: "**I reckon everything as complete loss for the sake of what is so much more valuable, the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord**" (Phil 3.8). This knowledge was not just 'head' knowledge – it was the knowledge derived from living in relationship with Jesus.

It was this ongoing relationship with Jesus which enabled Paul to weather the many difficulties he faced. As a pioneer Christian missionary he had more than his fair share of troubles: "**Five times I was given 39 lashes by the Jews; 3 times I was whipped by the Romans; and once I was stoned. I have been in 3 shipwrecks, and once I spent 24 hours in the waters. In many travels I have been in danger from floods and from robbers, in danger from fellow-Jews and from Gentiles; there have been dangers in the cities, dangers in the wilds, dangers on the high seas, and dangers from false friends**" (2 Cor 11.24-26).

But for Paul his relationship with Jesus made all the difference.

Only last Monday four of us from this church went to a 'Mind and Spirit' conference held in the Shire Hall. There we heard Professor Andrew Sims, a distinguished psychiatrist, give a paper on 'the ups and downs of spirituality in mental health'.

On the basis of 600 empirical studies he talked about the positive difference that faith in general could make to mental health – people of faith are not spared mental illness, but they are much more likely to make a better recovery.

He likened Christian faith to a rope – not a rope which binds a prisoner, but rather a rope which saves a climber from disaster.

Certainly this was true of Paul. For him life was lived in Christ.

- It was his relationship with Jesus which gave him strength to cope. "**I have strength to face all conditions by the power that Christ gives me**" (Phil 4.13). Yes, even in those desperate times, when everything went wrong, when physical health gave way, when friends failed him, in those moments of weakness he knew the sustaining strength of Christ.
- It was his relationship with Christ which gave him a great sense of joy. Many in Paul's position might have become bitter and resentful about the way life treated them. But not Paul. As his letter to the Philippians bears witness, his life overflowed with joy. "**May you always be joyful in your union with the Lord. I say it again, rejoice**" (4.4). The secret of his joy was Jesus – for he knew that ultimately God's purposes would win the day.

But needless to say, this relationship with Jesus needs to be maintained.

In this respect the Christian life can be compared with marriage: for a marriage to be successful it is not enough to make one's initial vows of love and loyalty – we have to work at marriage, we have to cultivate and develop the relationship that we have with our partner. And what is true of the marriage relationship, is true of our relationship with Jesus.

Again, let me commend to you Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Life*. For there are two chapters in particular where Rick Warren deals with how we can develop our relationship with God. If you have become stuck in your spiritual walk with God, then this is a book for you – join

3. LIFE IS LIVED FOR CHRIST

Overpowered by the Risen Christ on the Damascus Road and overwhelmed by his majesty, love & goodness, Paul could see no reason for being except to be for Christ. Indeed, if Christ were to be taken out of his life, then there would be nothing left in life. His was the purpose-driven life par excellence. Paul lived his life for Jesus.

At the time he wrote his letter to the Philippians, death was a very real option. He knew he could be taken out of his cell any time and executed then and there. But Paul wasn't afraid of dying: **“For what is life? To me it is Christ. Death, then, will bring more”** (Phil 1.21) – more of Christ that is. Indeed, as far as Paul was concerned, **“to leave this life and be with Christ... is a far better thing”** (Phil 1.23). Death for a Christian for a Christian holds no terrors. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said to his friends as he went to his death on Sunday April 18 1945: *“This is the end. For me the beginning of life”*.

But although Paul looked forward to heaven, he knew there was still much to be done in this world. **“For your sake it is much more important that I remain alive... I will stay on with you all, to add to your progress and joy in the faith”** (1.24,25). Paul was no escapist: he had a strong sense of purpose in life.

What was true of Paul, can also be true of each one of us. God doesn't want us to be so heavenly minded, that we are of no earthly good. The fact is that God has a particular purpose for each one of us. To quote Rick Warren again, *“You were shaped for serving God – you were made for a mission”*. A significant part of the Purpose Driving Life is discovering the purpose of God for our lives. If you don't know God's purpose for your life, then again let me encourage you to join us on this journey of discovery.

4. LIFE BEGINS WITH THE FIRST PERSON SINGULAR

To sum up, life that counts for anything begins with Christ, is lived in Christ, and is lived for Christ.

But for that life to begin, there must be faith – faith in particular in Jesus. Notice the way in which Paul uses the personal pronoun here. **“For what is life? TO ME, it is Christ”; “FOR ME to live is Christ”**. That's where Christian faith begins. Christian faith begins with the first person singular. Christian faith begins when we can say with Paul, **“the Son of God loved ME and gave himself for ME”** (Gal 4.4). Life begins with the first person singular: i.e. life begins with Christ when we give ourselves to Jesus.

This morning these five wish to give themselves publicly to Jesus.

They have already begun the journey of faith

Today, however, they are demonstrating for all to see their faith in Jesus who died for them and rose for them – Yes Lord, you died for me; yes, Lord you rose for me. And here in the waters of baptism I want to signal my intention to die to self and to live for you and for you alone.