

HOW SHALL FUTURE GENERATIONS LIVE?

Preached at URC Church Cambridge UK, September 2019

Deuteronomy 30:15-20 ; John 6:60-68

“I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.”

“To whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

A remarkable event will take place in Cape Town during the last week of September. About 5,000 young people from across Africa and even beyond will arrive to participate in the Taizé Pilgrimage of Trust. Taizé refers, of course, to the Taizé Community in France which has become a gathering place for young people across the world in search of spiritual direction in the modern world. The Taizé Community held its first African pilgrimage in Nairobi, Kenya, in 2008. Since then it has held similar events every four years in different countries: Rwanda in 2012, Benin in 2016, and now in Cape Town, South Africa, in 2019. These have been remarkable events, giving hope to many young people who have lost hope for the future of the world. It is an amazing ministry in nurturing an emerging generation of Christian leaders across the continent and beyond. Something that, I too, am passionate about, as I am sure you are as well, especially when we consider the state of the world and the challenges facing all of us, whether old or young.

When Isobel and I first visited Cambridge in 1986 and worshipped in this church, South Africa was still in the grip of apartheid, Britain had not yet heard of Brexit, and, for me personally, it was while I was giving a lecture at Westminster College during that visit, that my father died in Cape Town. I remember that year well. But times have changed. The apartheid regime has gone; Brexit appears imminent, and I am almost as old as my father when, aged 84, he died.

1.

Irrespective of where we live, we are inextricably bound together facing similar issues and problems, sharing similar fears and hopes, and struggling against the same principalities and powers that want to tear the world apart, invariably at the expense of the poor. No wonder that we all hunger for good news that will give us and the coming generation hope for the future. The universal question on our lips is, as it always has been, how will the next generation live? Not just how will our they *survive*, but whether their lives will be worth living if they do. And it seems self-evident that we will have to learn to live as neighbours and friends or else we will die as enemies.

During his imprisonment in Nazi Germany in the final days of the Second World War, the theologian and martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer kept on asking himself that very question: “How will future generations live?” It is a core question in the Bible, the question that the prophet who wrote the book of Deuteronomy had in mind when he delivered God’s message to Israel as it faced disaster: “I have set before you, life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.” Not just survive, but live.

Shortly before his imprisonment Bonhoeffer wrote an essay as a New Year's gift for his close friends. At the outset he asked:

Have there ever been people in history who in their time, like us, had so little ground under their feet, people to whom every possible alternative open to them at the time appeared equally unbearable, senseless, and contrary to life?

Most of us have more ground under our feet than Bonhoeffer had in prison as the war reached its traumatic end, though some do. So, the alternatives that face us may not seem equally unbearable. But that is little comfort, for many of those facing us are also contrary to life, contrary to the well-being of the planet and the common good of all. As a result, our common life as nations and global citizens is increasingly fragmented as things fall apart. The center does not hold because in a world of individual and national self-interest there is no moral core binding us together, claiming our allegiance or available to adjudicate our competing claims.

So, where does that leave us, especially in this post-modern age where any talk of truth is suspect, and the claims of Christian faith are treated with skepticism and disdain? To what ideology or leader shall we turn to find the direction we need to make the urgent decisions needed to affirm rather than contradict life? Is following Jesus as the Christ of faith still a viable option that gives us life and hope, that shapes our political choices and determines the values we seek to affirm and embody? Is that what we are celebrating this morning, or have we even lost confidence in the gospel as the way to life?

2.

Following Jesus as the Christ was not the only option available in first century Palestine or the wider Hellenistic and Roman world of his day. There were others who claimed to be the Messiah who would make Israel great again; there were religions of all kinds making promises they could not fulfil, and demands that no one could meet; and there were philosophies by the score that poured scorn on all of them in offering their advice about the good life, some profound others banal. There is little difference between then and now.

At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus attracted many followers, not least because of his ability to heal people, and the common people heard him gladly because of his criticism of the hypocrisy of the religious leaders of the day. But the time came when he began to spell out the costliness of discipleship and spoke of the need for him to go to Jerusalem, the seat of power, and die for the cause he proclaimed so passionately. As a result, many of Jesus' followers turned back; what Jesus was demanding was becoming less attractive. It was then that Jesus asked Peter: "Do you also wish to go away?" After a brief moment's reflection on the options available, and on all that he had heard from the lips of Jesus, Peter responds "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life." Indeed, when all alternatives seem to lead us nowhere, or seem to contradict life, to whom shall we go?

3.

Isobel and I enjoy watching the BBC TV series "Escape to the Country" which, I assume, is familiar to many of you. What I find interesting about the programme is not the desire of people to move away from busy cities and towns to live in the countryside, but what they are

looking for in doing so –peace and quietness, beautiful views, a nearby village, space to pursue hobbies, and invariably a nice pub. I don't blame people who want to live in the countryside. Isobel and I live on a Christian retreat centre in a beautiful valley full of vineyards. But seldom does anyone seeking a home on "Escape to the Country" ever ask for a house near a church or enquire about what possibilities there are for serving the community to which they plan to move. Escape to the country seems to be a metaphor for escaping from responsibility for contributing to the well-being of the world driven by self-interest. Of course, we can stay where we are, and still escape by leaving responsibility for the world to others, not least the next generation! But the world is in a mess not least because too many people do not want to accept responsibility for making it a better place.

When Jesus asks us "will you also go away?" we might well respond why shouldn't we, and why do we need to follow him and his way? We can take care of ourselves; we have come of age; we have no need of religion or philosophy of any kind. Live and let live, we say! Let us set our own standards and goals! Trust our feelings and conscience to guide us! Do to others as you would have them do to you, we say, though often without any intention of doing so. But, of course, this is making a choice, a choice driven by self-interest rather than the common good. That is why Jesus' words remain pertinent to us as Christians today: "will we also go away?" In other words, will we also join those who seek to escape from responsibility for the world, and therefore from taking responsibility for how future generations will live? Or do we still believe with Peter that, for us, Jesus has the "words of eternal life?"

4.

There are innumerable passages in John's gospel where Jesus says that those who believe in him have "eternal life". In saying this he is not referring to life after death, but to life here and now, life in all its fullness, life lived within the orbit of God's reign; the kind of life God intends for us personally and together, the kind of life for which we and all humans hunger. This does not mean believing in him as a mental or religious act or accepting all the dogmas of the church, but living life trusting that the way Jesus proclaims and the truth he embodies is life-giving, a way of being in the world that is truthful, hopeful, joyful.

The fact that we are here today, participating in this act of worship, acknowledging Jesus as the Christ in our hymns and prayers, indicates that we identify with Peter. We do not want to go away. We still believe that Jesus is the way, truth and life even if we no longer think that Christianity is the only way or truth, or that the Church is the only haven of salvation. But our faith and hope should not be in Christianity as a religion, or in the Church as an institution. It should be in Jesus if we believe his way and truth gives hope in the midst of despair, love in the midst of hate, and life in the midst of death.

Our problem is, perhaps, not that we do not believe this, but we are unsure about how our faith in Christ can find meaningful expression in the life of the world, how it can shape our choices, and inform our sense of responsibility. How does our faith in Christ find help us negotiate the alternatives facing us, the contending parties and ideologies claiming our support and vote? We know for sure that Christ and the gospel cannot be boxed into any of

the contending options vying for our allegiance, and sometimes we have to choose between alternatives that we know are imperfect. So how we relate our faith in Christ as the giver of life to life in a complex world is the challenge. Yet it is no more challenging than it was for the first disciples, among them Peter, when called to costly discipleship.

Perhaps the real problem is that we are not always willing to accept the conditions that following Jesus requires. Terms and conditions apply. These are not hidden in the small print of a footnote but blazoned on every page of the New Testament. To choose life rather than death means making a commitment to responsible living that is costly. For the one to whom we turn for life is the one who was crucified in the process of offering life to the world. To trust in Jesus' way of justice and peace is costly, but it is choosing life rather than death even if it requires dying to self-interest. But there were few in that "faithless generation", as Jesus named it, who were prepared to heed his call to such discipleship and life in its fulness. And that is probably true today as well.

5.

What must we do, then, not just for our own sake, but for the sake of the coming generation which will have to live in a world we have messed up so badly? In responding to his own question, Bonhoeffer describes several symptoms that led to the German catastrophe, symptoms of the bad choices made by the people. One of these he said is "stupidity" against which, he despairingly says, "we are defenseless." The problem is that reason falls on deaf ears, facts that contradict one's prejudices are rejected even if irrefutable. But this, Bonhoeffer says, is symptomatic of a much deeper human problem, namely the lack of the will to act in the interest of the common good rather than in self-interest. For that reason, the problem needs to be addressed at a deeper, spiritual level. The "power of the soul is lacking," Bonhoeffer says. We have learnt how to cope with most things, but we have not learnt how to deal with ourselves, with our prejudices, our lack of will or commitment to the common good.

This is nothing new. It has been demonstrated time and again, and not least when nations have tried to resolve their problems in ways that led to death not to life. Just as the Old Testament prophets continually warned Israel against acting foolishly, thinking they could achieve peace without pursuing justice, so did the advocates of apartheid in South Africa. Our histories, whether in South Africa or Britain, or across the globe, have been shaped too often by folly and stupidity. That is why, if we have any concern about how future generations will live, we need to reflect carefully on our histories and listen carefully to the words of the prophets:

"I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses.
Choose life so that you and your descendants may live."

I doubt whether the church, irrespective of denomination, will ever again become a powerful institution such as it was during the heyday of Christendom. Of course, there will be Christians voices that still carry authority, and there will be many activities that still demonstrate the ability of the church to exercise its influence in society – certainly in many

countries beyond Europe if not always here. But no matter how much Jesus attracted crowds to hear him speak and heal the sick, his core followers have always been far less in number. In fact, he spoke about them as the “salt of the earth”, and that is not a metaphor that speaks of numbers and size, but one that has to do with making a difference to the life of the world.

The question that faces the church today irrespective of where it is located is not so much how we are going to preserve our institutions, maintain our buildings, and raise money in order to do so – all necessary in some way. The question is, rather, whether we are witnesses to the life which Jesus offers the world. Whether or not our presence in the world makes a qualitative difference to its life. Are we among those who are witnessing to the life that Jesus offers, and doing so because we actually believe that his words are those of “eternal life”? If we don’t believe that, then the church is doomed.

But events such as the Taize Pillgrimage that I mentioned at the outset give me hope, as do much else that is happening around the globe. The church may appear to be dying in some places, but new life is evident in many others. From these signs of new life fresh hope springs. Rather than bemoan the state of the world, or the state of the nation and church, our task in acting responsibly is to identify and participate in bringing signs of hope to birth with the new generation.

John de Gruchy