

Reflection for Sunday 21 March

According to Monty Python in 1983, the meaning of life is, 'try and be nice to people, avoid eating fat, read a good book every now and then, get some walking in, and try and live together in peace and harmony with people of all creeds and nations.' Nothing very special?

Can we offer something better? If we turn to St John, it doesn't, at first, seem too promising. Jesus's words as John records them seem blunt and harsh. They remind me of the contents of the hymn book specially made for use in Bedlington Parish Church in 1882. Typical is that old favourite, 'There is a blessed home beyond this land of woe, where trials never come, nor tears of sorrow flow.' Another jolly ditty in a similar vein begins, 'Days and moments quickly flying, blend the living with the dead; soon will you and I be lying each within our narrow bed.'

The hard-pressed mining community no doubt sang these verses with gusto. They were folk all too used to a life which could be cruelly cut short underground, or in infancy. They would probably have read Jesus's words about hating our life in this world with more sanguine acceptance than we do. After all, this life wasn't too much to sing home about, so the next life needed to be better, and maybe it couldn't come soon enough? Eternal life and the life to come were the same thing, weren't they? And, surely, greatly to be preferred to the rigours of life in late nineteenth century Northumberland?

Today, few of us think like that. Even many good Christian people have tacitly adopted the humanist slogan, 'one life,' and the associated imperative to make the most of it, because that's all there is – at least that we can be sure about. Making the most of every moment is, of course, a thoroughly good thing. Doesn't Jesus himself encourage us to live in the moment? Our problem comes when we see the fulfilment of our lives as an opportunity to do just what we want and to live life on the edge, as if only the ultimate experience counts, or at least the ticking off of as many moments of gratification as we can accumulate from an ever-growing bucket list.

It's this, I think, that Jesus questions in our passage. Jesus isn't against life. Quite the opposite, in fact. What underpins his words is a concern for what makes life truly worth living, in a way that enable us to really begin to discover the meaning of life.

The root of the problem that he addresses is what goes wrong when we seize life as a possession rather than as a gift to be shared. 'It's my life,' we might say, 'I'll do what I like,' but Jesus's riposte is that it's only when we offer it to other people that we discover just how good and rich it can be - and find meaning.

This, of course, has been one of the deepest frustrations of the last twelve months – living for others is so much harder when you can't give someone a hug, or even see them face to face.

And yet we also have to be careful that in preaching the life-giving value of giving of ourselves for others we don't simply equate that with the draining experience, faced by so many on the NHS frontline this year, of being asked to give their all for little reward. Too many people are so exhausted that they're not able to relate to those who matter to them in a life-enhancing way. Sheer hard work is not, in itself, living for others, as the miners and their women-folk in Bedlington in 1882 would have been the first to say.

That said, as followers of Christ, it remains true that we're called to make him known in and through our lives. The flip side of his saying 'wherever I am, there will my servant be also', is that wherever we are, so will Jesus be – if we try to live in the spirit of the love that his life and death reveals and sets free.

Jesus does not ask the impossible of us, but he insists that the only way that we'll find fulfilment lies in self-giving love, kindness and generosity and not in the single-minded enterprise of pleasing ourselves before this all too short life is taken from us.

Small things matter every bit as grand gestures. I was very taken by the little prayer that Sara (churchwarden in Blanchland) offered in our service from Blanchland Abbey a fortnight ago, which makes just this point: 'A little bit of kindness, a little bit of care, a little bit of tenderness is the essence of a prayer.' And prayer, of course, is the act of consciously trying to align ourselves with God's will.

And as St Paul said, let love be genuine. Do it from the bottom of your heart. Do it because when its shared it seems to grow rather than to be exhausted. And this surely has also to apply to our common life in the church, in whatever way we act together, even with the constraints we now have to face.

Mind you, let's be careful not to claim we're generous and open hearted unless we can hand on heart be sure that we truly are. I rather think that we in the church have a special responsibility to make sure that our actions are stronger than our words.

But if we do our best, God will help us. God's spirit is with us and we'll discover that the meaning of life really is more special than Monty Python feared. In fact, in the words of another hymn: 'Now is eternal life, if risen with Christ we stand.' We dare to believe that we do.