

### **Easter Four: Life Abundant**

Abundance theology has become a bit of a buzz word in some parts of the Christian community. And it has sadly come to mean that if you are one of God's chosen ones then abundance will come your way, or worse still if you go to the right church and give lots of your income to the preacher you will be rewarded with pretty much whatever materially you desire. I have heard it put almost that crudely.

As part of my theological training we spent the first semester of Sundays going to visit different churches. One Sunday I went to one of the mega churches in the northern suburbs. It was an old basketball stadium that sat well over 1,500 people. There was a visiting American evangelist/healer and teacher as well as the local sportsperson become senior pastor. There were two different offerings and as the plate was handed around for a second time we were prayerfully encouraged to consider what we wanted and to ask our generous Father for this as we put our money joyfully in the plate. If we wanted white goods then to specify what brand even! And then to visualise the generosity of God raining down on us. Well, I have been blessed with a cartoon brain so I could see large family size refrigerators falling upon greedy upturned faces!!

Can that possibly be what Jesus meant? That if you do the "right thing" by whatever religious definition that you will be materially rewarded? Now before we dismiss it too quickly remember the theology of much of Proverbs and various Psalms that state that if you are good then God will reward you and that if you are poor then it must be because you have sinned. It is not a philosophy only of late 20<sup>th</sup> century mega churches, although there are some churches which seem to have spawned a particularly ugly version. We can understand the attractiveness of this understanding of abundance. If you put what you have in – or at least more than 10% - then you will get all you want out of it. Nothing depends on Grace rather it is a transaction with the divine and you know what you expect to get out of it.

This morning, in exploring another understanding of abundance, it's actually very helpful to see the readings side by side as they are in the pew sheet. We have the well known Psalm 23 which assures us of the providence and faithfulness of God in all circumstances. And then beside it we see the Acts of the Apostles and the story that they shared everything together and sold their personal property so that they all had enough. God's providence is worked out in how we relate to each other and how we look after each other. God gives us what we need and much of what we want through the generosity and availability of us to one another. At some basic economic and biological since that is always true – we are all part of overlapping systems. But in the Acts of the Apostles we see that this sharing has become conscious and intentional. There is an awareness, because of the resurrected Christ, that belonging to God means belonging to one's neighbours in particularly practical and real ways. That belonging to the one who came proclaiming the nearness of the kingdom of God means living as though in the kingdom – now!

And then as we read the letter of Peter beside the gospel we are reminded that the one we are bound together in, the corner stone of our new community, is the stone that the builders rejected. It is not into the community of those most likely to succeed or shine or impress that we are called. It is into the community of those who are from the edge, the left overs, the not completely sure, the dubious, the ones who have little power, those who are attracted to the life to be found not at the centre of society but at its margins. And this strange collection is the chosen people!

And then the words of Jesus the resurrected Christ, according to St John, promising that we are called into life abundant. But even here it is an abundance that is to be found by entering in through the gate, the body of Jesus. We are to enter into abundance through the broken body of the rejected, despised, sacrificed one.

Is this not paradox? To find that abundance is not some consumerist paradise but is the belonging that is to be found in the brokenness of the rejected ones; that plenty is to be found in the giving over of all one owns; that wholeness is to be found by participating in the life of the body and blood of the despised one. Just as we spoke last week about the beauty that is to be found in the brokenness of ourselves and each other as in the bread that is blessed and broken that we might be given to one another we hear it spelt out a little further.

And if I may share my own story of white goods and abundance. Not long after my visit to the mega church suggesting praying for your particular brand of new white good my old frig packed up, at the beginning of summer and in my first year as a theology student with three dependent teenagers and no income. Not good timing. My dear neighbour and godmother of my three children organised a quick whip around the local street and surprised me the following day with enough money to buy a second hand frig - which has just survived its fourth move since then!

God's abundance is experienced when we are dependent on the divine goodness and generosity built into the created world and so often delivered to us through the neighbourly kindness of others who know seasons of vulnerability and plenty.

The message of the resurrection of Jesus is not a simple reversal of physical death back into physical life. Rather resurrection is new and different life out of death, love that flourishes where hate has had a hold, and generosity that is born of the impulse to share from the little or plenty that we are blessed with. Just as the disciples all seem to have struggled to recognise the resurrected Jesus so we too may struggle to recognise this strange good news. And even more to live it out in our lives.

Even so, come Lord Jesus Christ.