

St. Augustine's Sermons

Calgary, Alberta

The Rev. Jonathan Gibson

Easter Sunday March 23 2008

Life's Equation

The Text: Ecclesiastes

I've Seen It All

Call me "the Quester." I've been king over Israel in Jerusalem. I looked most carefully into everything, searched out all that is done on this earth. And let me tell you, there's not much to write home about. God hasn't made it easy for us. I've seen it all and it's nothing but smoke—smoke, and spitting into the wind.

Life's a corkscrew that can't be straightened,
A minus that won't add up.

I said to myself, "I know more and I'm wiser than anyone before me in Jerusalem. I've stockpiled wisdom and knowledge." What I've finally concluded is that so-called wisdom and knowledge are mindless and witless—nothing but spitting into the wind.

Much learning earns you much trouble.
The more you know, the more you hurt.....

The Final Word

Besides being wise himself, the Quester also taught others knowledge. He weighed, examined, and arranged many proverbs. The Quester did his best to find the right words and write the plain truth.

The words of the wise prod us to live well.

They're like nails hammered home, holding life together.
They are given by God, the one Shepherd.

But regarding anything beyond this, dear friend, go easy. There's no end to the publishing of books, and constant study wears you out so you're no good for anything else. The last and final word is this:

Fear God.
Do what he tells you.

And that's it. Eventually God will bring everything that we do out into the open and judge it according to its hidden intent, whether it's good or evil.

.....

A man runs into the vet's office carrying his dog, screaming for help. The vet rushes him back to an examination room and has him put his dog down on the examination table. The vet examines the still, limp body and after a few moments tells the man that his dog, regrettably, is dead.

The man, clearly agitated and not willing to accept this, demands a second opinion. The vet goes into the back room and comes out with a cat and puts the cat down next to the dog's body. The cat sniffs the body, walks from head to tail poking and sniffing the dog's body and finally looks at the vet and meows. The vet looks at the man and says, "I'm sorry, but the cat thinks that your dog is dead too."

The man is still unwilling to accept that his dog is dead. The vet brings in a black Labrador. The lab sniffs the body, walks from head to tail, and finally looks at the vet and barks. The vet looks at the man and says, "I'm sorry, but the lab thinks your dog is dead too."

The man, finally resigned to the diagnosis, thanks the vet and asks how much he owes. The vet answers, "\$650. "\$650 to tell me my dog is dead?" exclaimed the man....

"Well," the vet replies, "I would only have charged you \$50 for my initial diagnosis. The additional \$600 was for the cat scan and lab tests."

Death is something that we all have to come to terms with but like the man in my joke, it is something that we so want to resist and deny. This is because death is an enemy who inevitably can be put off yes, but not avoided. Death looms large over life and I am not only talking about our physical death. There are many deaths that we face in life that cause us to perhaps muse with King Solomon who said:

Life's a corkscrew that can't be straightened,
A minus that won't add up.

This book states that this world's course is enigmatic, that much of what happens is quite inexplicable to us, and that most occurrences under the sun bear no outward sign of a rational, moral God ordering them at all. As you read through the book much of what he relates of the enigma of life is shaped by the call of death, in its many representations, overhanging us all.

As the well known and much respected Anglican Theologian, J. I Packer has stated:

Look says Ecclesiastes at the sort of world we live in. Take off your rose-coloured spectacles, rub your eyes, and look at it long and hard. ... You see death coming to everyone sooner or later, but coming haphazard; its coming bears no relation to good or ill desert. ... You see evil running rampant. Seeing all this, you realize that God's order of events is inscrutable, much as you want to make it out, you cannot do so. For the truth is that God in His wisdom, to make and keep us humble and to teach us to walk by faith, has hidden from us almost everything that we should like to know about the providential purposes which He is working out in the world, churches and in our lives.¹

And so as we gather here this morning there are some who may feel very much like the Preacher; death in one of its multifaceted expressions has or is touching your life.

- Perhaps you are perplexed by a relationship that is a minus that won't add up because it has turned sour and is dying or is now dead.
- It might be that you are feeling trapped in your work and going to the office Monday to Friday feels like being entombed in Joseph's grave.

¹ J.I. Packer: *Knowing God*; Page 113-114

- ❑ Perhaps you are overcome with a sense of disappointment because a business venture did not turn out as you had hoped and a dream has died.
- ❑ It might be that you are living with an illness which is taking a course in your life that is like a millstone and because of what you are facing death seems far too close for comfort.
- ❑ It could be that you are in the midst of grief as you deal with the loss of one close to you. This loss could be painful because you are so missing the one who is now gone. Or it could be painful because as you remember that relationship that is now over you have regrets that it was one marked by misunderstanding and mistrust and void of reconciliation.

These and many other experiences in our lives can lead us to say that death is so close at hand and because of this there is so much in life that is left unresolved, like a chord progression that never returns to the tonic but is left hanging.

And yet this is Easter weekend and because of the two events that we are remembering this weekend we are given insight into how to live in a world that does so often seem enigmatic.

In Matthew 28 we read words that reference both the crucifixion and resurrection. We are told that the angel said to the women:

Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen, as he said.

For thousands of years those who have trusted in the truth of this message have been provided with a means to live with the enigmas of which Ecclesiastes speaks with a deeper conviction about how God is active in the world, thus imparting to them insight as to how to live wisely in a seemingly senseless world. For when we see life through the prism of the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus we see how pervasive is the presence of Christ in a world where life can seem to be a minus that doesn't add up.

There are three things I want to recall for you about the Crucifixion and two concerning the Resurrection.

1. The crucifixion was painful
2. The crucifixion was planned
3. The crucifixion of Jesus is precious.

1. The Resurrection was powerful
2. The Resurrection is personal.

Summary Statement:

To grasp something of the pervasiveness of Christ's presence in a cork screw shaped world like this it is important to recall that his crucifixion was painful, planned, and precious and Jesus' resurrection was powerful and personal.

1. The Crucifixion

i) The crucifixion of Jesus was painful.

Crucifixion was a punishment meted out for such crimes as treason, desertion in the face of the enemy, robbery, piracy, assassination, sedition, etc. . . . Among the Romans, crucifixion was preceded by scourging, undoubtedly to hasten impending death. The number of nails used seems to have been indeterminate. A tablet, on which the feet rested or on which the body was partly supported, seems to have been a part of the cross to keep the wounds from tearing through the transfixed members.... The suffering of death by crucifixion was intense, especially in hot climates. . . .

The length of this agony was wholly determined by the constitution of the victim, but death rarely ensued before thirty-six hours had elapsed. . . . The sudden death of Jesus evidently was a matter of astonishment. So there is no surprise when we read in the gospels that, Jesus gave a "loud cry" (Mark 15: 37). His suffering in those last hours was indescribable.

Now here if ever there is one is a minus that does not add up. There is a challenge faced by all who want to live with purpose and meaning and it is the reality of suffering. When we are wrecked by emotional, physical and or spiritual pain it can lead us to question life's value and meaning. And yet as we are able to look at the suffering of Jesus we learn that God does not remove us from suffering but that through our suffering there is an opportunity for us to come to a fuller understanding of how God is involved in our world. And at times it is in that place of deep anguish when we cry out to him and experience his seeming absence, as Jesus did on the Cross, that we learn more about how through weakness we discover something new about the character of God. In this world, as the Crucifixion vividly shows, God shows himself to us in weakness. This is not something easily learned

but the Bible testifies on both the Old and New Testaments that although seemingly senseless, suffering can bring us to a place where we look for life's deeper meaning as we gain insight into God being present to us through suffering, not in its avoidance.

Perhaps there are some here today who have encountered suffering so intense and have as a result chosen to re-evaluate life's deeper meaning by discovering the suffering Jesus present to you at that point of most intense pain. Or it may be that for you at the moment you have not yet been able to find a deeper meaning through your suffering and cry out to God, as did Jesus: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.

Pain cannot be avoided but what we do with seeking to understand our pain can provide an opportunity for us to see Jesus more clearly.

Not only was the crucifixion painful,

ii) The crucifixion of Jesus was planned by God.

Jesus said to his disciples several times that this was his destiny. For instance, Matthew 17:22-23a: "Jesus said to them, 'The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men; and they will kill Him, and He will be raised on the third day.'" In Acts 4:27-28, the disciples prayed to God like this: "Truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur." The death of Jesus was not a historical fluke or accident or merely the effect of great injustice. It was by the plan of God.

"God did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all" (Romans 8:32). Jesus was crucified by design, not accident.

Because this is true of the crucifixion of Jesus we can claim that although there is much in our lives that seems to be random and senseless there is a meaning to all of life, even if in the present we cannot understand what that meaning is. You see the Bible teaches that in those situations where life appears to be most desperate and void of meaning God is at work in the world and our lives in ways that see him come to us not in power but in weakness. And although life so often appears random, the Bible declares emphatically that there is an author to life whose name is God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, and all things are working together according to God's

overarching plan and purpose. To know this does not take away from our experiencing of senselessness at times, but it does allow us to remember that our present suffering is like a series of pixels in a much larger image, much of which is currently not in our view but is in God's.

So not only was the crucifixion of Jesus painful and planned:

iii) The crucifixion of Jesus is also precious.

This is the word used by those who knew Jesus best. Peter wrote:

"You were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ" (1 Peter 1:18-19). And again in 1 Peter 2:7:

"To you therefore who believe, he is precious."

The crucifixion of Jesus is precious to those who believe, because by that death we are ransomed from sin and guilt and condemnation and hell, and given eternal life. This is what Jesus came to accomplish: eternal life for all who believe. So if we try to make sense of our present lives without this understanding of eternity we will not be able to solve the riddle that is life.

The Christian Faith is you see the real Fairy Tale. While we are in this world of heartaches, minuses that don't add up and a corkscrew shaped world that we cannot straighten, because we see Jesus on the Cross it gives all of our anguish a context because we can see them in the shadow of the Cross, where Jesus death was painful, planned and precious but because of Easter resolves in a happily ever after ending.

Jesus Is Risen:

This is why the Resurrection of Jesus is just as crucial as his crucifixion. So we turn now to that other statement in Matthew 28:6. The angel said to Mary and the others, "He is not here, for He has risen, just as He said. Come, see the place where He was lying."

What can we say about the resurrection of Jesus? I could talk for hours about it. If I had time, I would talk about how public it was, because he appeared to so many and for so many days to increase our confidence that it is true and real (1 Corinthians 15:6; Acts 1:3); and how physical it was, not ghostly or mystical (Luke 24:39-43); and how

productive it was, because it secured the resurrection of all who trust him (1 Corinthians 15:20).

But I will only linger over two things about the resurrection of Jesus, which correspond to Matthew 28: 18 and 20.) The resurrection of Jesus was powerful; and 2) the resurrection of Jesus was personal.

i) The resurrection of Jesus was powerful.

This is what Jesus said in verse 18b: "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth." This is what it means in the New Testament when Peter says, "[He has] been exalted to the right hand of God" (Acts 2:33); and Stephen says, as he is being stoned to death for his faith, "I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God" (Acts 7:56); and Paul says, "Christ is seated at the right hand of God" (Colossians 3:1); and Hebrews says, "[Christ] endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (12:2).

The right hand of God is the place of ultimate authority along with God the Father. Paul says he is there "Because He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet" (1 Corinthians 15:25). The Resurrection of Jesus restored Jesus to a place of triumphant all-authority over all things. And from there he works out his saving purposes in the world -with authority over politics and government and industry and business and science and education and entertainment and media and weather and stars and light and energy and life and death. His cause cannot fail. If you have all power and all authority and cannot die, your cause cannot fail.

This is a great reason for following Jesus. He cannot fail. Sin and death and hell and evil and Satan cannot defeat his purposes. He will win. It is for this reason that we need to see all of our defeats and present difficulties, all of our deaths in light of Easter. Christians do know how the story ends. We know that at the end of history we will be on the winning team.

Because Jesus cannot lose and cannot ultimately fail, don't you think this is a good reason to trust him and follow him? It is suicide to oppose him or ignore him.

But to win us over, Jesus ends his time on this earth, and Matthew ends his gospel with a very personal promise based on the resurrection.

ii) The resurrection of Jesus was personal.

Matthew 28:20b, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." This is not a promise only to the eleven apostles, because the promise is "to the end of the age" - this present age of the world in which we live. While there are followers of Jesus in this age (in this world) the promise holds true for all of us - "I am with you always."

Here's the practical value of this promise. You might take the truth of Christ's authority over all things and just turn it into a theological problem. Well, if he has authority over the world, why is it in such a mess? Or: If he has authority over life and death, why did my child or wife or mother die?

But there is another way to respond to the power and authority of Jesus. If you will - and Jesus calls you to this - you can see it as the power and authority to free you from sin and fear and greed so that when you trust his promise to be with you, you are unstoppable in your love. If he is with you to the end, and if he has all authority in the universe, then you can love and serve and sacrifice, and never lose. This is the practical effect of the resurrection of Jesus when you experience it as powerful and personal.

If you trust him to be powerful for you and personally there for you, no matter what, you will be able to live your life not just for your private interests, but in the service of God and his kingdom.

If Jesus is not all-powerful and not personally with us to the end, and if we don't trust him to be that for us, we will simply ignore the needs of others and live for our own private comfort as a way to compensate for the suffering and difficulties of life.

And yet if we allow the truth of Easter to reach down into our hearts and transform our minds it will change the way we live in this world. At a time when so many people are seeking to secure their own interests and live pre-occupied with themselves, the authority of Jesus calls us to look beyond ourselves to live lives in joyful service to God and others.

What is a more enriching way to live, looking out only for your own interests or to live so that we overcome the inertia that the complexity of life can sometimes instill in us by choosing to live in the service of others?

Jesus came, was crucified and rose from the dead with all authority and promised to be with us to the end of the age - to create a people whose sins are forgiven, and whose hearts are full of the love of God, and who are so emboldened by the triumphant Christ, that they spend their lives with risk and sacrifice and love to help others know and enjoy the greatness of Christ forever and ever.

Conclusion

Yes, it is true that life is often like a minus that won't add up, a corkscrew that cannot be straightened. But let me tell you something. When you come to see the Crucifixion of Jesus as painful, planned and precious and his Resurrection as powerful and personal than we can turn to the last passage of Ecclesiastes and declare:

The words of the wise prod us to live well.
They're like nails hammered home, holding life together.
They are given by God, the one Shepherd.

But regarding anything beyond this, dear friend, go easy. There's no end to the publishing of books, and constant study wears you out so you're no good for anything else. The last and final word is this:

Fear God.
Do what he tells you.

May we hear the words of wisdom that the Crucifixion and Resurrection impart to us and so see life held together so we can live well in a world where life's mirage would have us conclude:

Life's a corkscrew that can't be straightened,
A minus that won't add up.

