



ABUNDANT LIFE

A Pastoral Letter to the Teulu Asaph from the Bishop of St Asaph

March 2021

I think I've remarked before that the verse of the Bible to which I keep coming back as my favourite is John Chapter 10, verse 10. "I have come that they may have life, and life in all its abundance." For me, the journey of faith with God can bring joy, resilience, peace, hope and fortitude. It is a down-payment in this life of an eternal destiny, which is wrought not by my faithfulness (which is pretty patchy), but by God's gracious work in me. It is not that we have to reach a pass mark of goodness in order to achieve heaven – "the free gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 6.23). Having written off the debt of sin and brokenness by his death and resurrection, Jesus opens the way for us to embrace eternal life by faith. There is more, however, for we are called into the discovery of this fullness of life not just in heaven, but in this life, which, to give it another name, is holiness.

St Irenaeus, one of the earliest great teachers of the Church in the generations after the apostles, wrote this: "For the glory of God is a living human being; and the life of man consists in beholding God." He was talking about Jesus, but also about the way in which keeping God in our sights in life is to be always open to changing "from glory into glory" (2 Corinthians 3.18). Carl Jung, the twentieth century psycho-analyst, wrote "Who looks outside, dreams; who looks inside awakes.", and it is this truth – that we need to be open towards God in our lives, in our hearts, to embark on what has been called the interior journey – which gives birth to the eternal life that Jesus speaks about. "You will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is focussed upon you." (Isaiah 26.3)

I've been reading the letters of Nelson Mandela recently, and there's one passage which resonates with me particularly:

"In judging our progress as individuals we tend to concentrate on external factors such as one's social position, influence and popularity, wealth and standard of education. These are of course important ... But internal factors may be even more crucial in assessing one's development as a human being. Honesty, sincerity, simplicity, humility, pure generosity, absence of vanity, readiness to serve others – qualities which are within easy reach of every soul – are the foundation of one's spiritual life. Development in matters of this nature is inconceivable without serious introspection, without knowing yourself, your weaknesses and mistakes. ... Never forget that a saint is a sinner who keeps on trying."

It reminds me of one of my favourite stories in CS Lewis' work, *The Great Divorce*. In the book, our hero has a dream that he is carried up to the gate of heaven. While he's there, a great procession gathers, all angels and trumpets and singing choirs. In the midst, a radiant and royal female figure, whom the author assumes must be the Virgin Mary herself. Inquiring of a neighbouring angel in the crowd, he gets the answer: "No, her name is Sarah Smith, and she lived on Golder's Green ... she is one of the great ones in heaven." Sarah, it turns out, became the person that God wanted her to become because she allowed God to work through her – she became a mother figure to all children in need, she became a focus in her community for kindness and love, she lived life to the full and was transfigured by joy.

There's another verse I think of in the Book of the prophet Ezekiel (36.26), where God speaks of his intentions for God's people: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh."

Greatness in the Kingdom of Heaven does not depend on your achievements in the world, it depends upon you growing into that person of love and holiness that God intends you to be. Lent truly is the Springtime of the Soul, because it calls us to open ourselves to God's transfiguring power in our hearts, to take the interior journey.

