

Fully Human – Fully Alive – 1st November 2009

(4th in a series "The Church as perceived by the world")

St George's Anglican Church, Epsom, Auckland

Readings OT: Isaiah 40:28-31
 Epistle: 1 Peter 1:3-9
 Gospel: John 8:31-36

It was St Irenaeus in the 2nd century who wrote, "*The glory of God is a human being 'fully alive.'*" and so over the centuries since, there has been many a sermon entitled "fully human – fully alive" as people have reflected on Irenaeus' statement.

In the generic and biological sense of course we're all fully alive and fully human this morning, so what is it that Irenaeus is telling us? Humanity, in our theology, has uniqueness that distinguishes it from every other form of life, because humanity was made in the image of God and also, was made alive by the breath of God (Genesis 2:7) and so the very meaning and purpose of life for us will be found when we embrace these truths. For humanity, being alive is more than having a functioning metabolism; it is in knowing God whose life and character is implanted in us. We all seek a sense of purpose for our existence and when we find that by finding God in us, we have life *plus*. The scriptures often teach truth through poetry and metaphor, so see how brilliantly Isaiah expresses being *fully alive* and having life *plus* !!

*.....but those who hope in the LORD
will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint. (Isaiah 40:31)*

Jesus spoke of coming to bring freedom and life to the people, but not ordinary freedom or ordinary life. He spoke of bringing superlative freedom and superlative life, freedom and life with the *plus* factor (John 8:36 & 10:10). His Jewish listeners of the time were actually under political dominance of the Romans and so in fact they weren't truly free people in the sense of having their own national independence. This was a matter of great irritation to them, and so what he was really saying was that even in their circumstances of anger and frustration, and of embarrassment and indignity, there was a freedom to be found that would enable them to break out of their shackles of bitterness, and that would enable them to rise above their circumstances and to have a new world view that wasn't dominated and determined by negativity, but by hope and optimism. There was a freedom that they could discover that could put a smile on their face and make them people who rejoiced instead of grumbled and whose attitude would defeat and render powerless the negativity of their circumstances. There was freedom possible that nothing could take away – the freedom gained upon the discovery of the glory of God within each individual. This is a freedom which would enable each person to bask in the love of God that flooded their being because God's very image as residing in them and God's very breath was their source of life. It would bring their souls alive and give them a completely new set of lenses through which to see the circumstances of lives. What a dignifying discovery for anyone to find about themselves! Then this freedom in turn would enable each person to look at the other, their neighbour, with the same joy and delight because God's loving glory resides in the other person as well. This is a freedom and life which has the potential to completely transform the human experience and radically change the way we relate

to each other and to change the shape of the world. It is the way of abundant life. Through it we become fully human and fully alive.

Dr. Howard Zehr (Professor of Restorative Justice, Centre for Justice & Peacebuilding, Eastern Mennonite University Penn. USA), a writer and proponent of restorative justice, and also a photographer has published a wonderful photographic essay of men and women in American prisons who are serving a true life sentence (*Doing Life*). Many began their sentence as teenagers but they will never be released. Their stories are of finding a purpose in life that transcends their circumstances so that although they are physically in prison, they are far from imprisoned in their spirit. They are artists, poets, writers, academics, teachers, mentors, doctors, counsellors etc, whose influence has reached far outside of the prison walls that will always contain them. For many of them this freedom to become..... has come when they have discovered the ever present unconditional love of God for them and then have been able to become "more alive" than they were - *fully alive* to the *Glory of God* (Irenaeus).

For some too, the freedom to become fully alive came when they were able to confess their wrongdoing and receive forgiveness from God and from their victim. The glory of God is revealed when people reconcile and restore unity.

We all need to heed this, because restoration and reconciliation where there is disunity is most certainly the work of God's Spirit. Unity is an integral feature of the image of God, and when we are in disunity we will not be fully alive nor able to demonstrate the Glory of God. Zehr spoke graphically of this again at a conference at Massey University, Albany (*Just Peace: 2000*) where he spoke of the resultant dysfunction of a victim which, unless there was a process of restoration of relationship and unity, could over time turn that person into someone who reflected the very same traits of dysfunction of the actual offender. A victim can become bitter and resentful about life and hold a grudge that cripples him or her from recovery and thus holds them back from ever becoming "fully alive". Forgiveness where there has been wrong and injustice can release a person from the prison of their mind, from the anger, resentment and vengeance that is clung to. The unforgiving person can never experience *freedom plus* or *life plus*. Forgiveness, especially where there has been injustice, is quite unnatural and counterintuitive, but it is a God factor that will bring freedom *indeed* and life *more abundant* and not only to the forgiver, but also to the forgiven. This is the Glory of God. This is being fully human and fully alive.

So what Jesus offers is a richness of life now, that will illuminate us and also those around us as God's glory flows out of us, and so faith in Christ is much more than salvation for our soul in a future time; it is about bringing the Kingdom of God to earth; it is about living in the here and now with influence as salt and light as David Crawley reminded us last week. I loved his picture of many Christians being like people waiting at a bus stop – waiting for something big to happen. Being a Christian is not about waiting, - it's about working. It's about living – about living differently – about being liberated from the things that prevent us being fully alive – it's about discovering the Glory of God within us and radiating that so that others can discover it too – it's about rejoicing in freedom, about loving life and enjoying the gifts of God all around us.

We can't be fully alive if we're grumblers – always complaining about our circumstances, and never able therefore to discover the glory of God in ourselves let alone another.

We can't be fully alive if we cling to our problems. Sometimes we like to possess our problems because to hang on to them gives us an excuse to be grumpy. We can become neurotic in this

way and only able to see life in terms of our problems. We can't be fully alive if we hang on to our guilt. The superlative freedom that Jesus gives – the life *plus* – that He offers is the removal of our guilt – redemption. This is the freedom that Howard Zehr's prisoners found. Curiously we often push away the healing and redeeming love of God, preferring to remain trapped by our guilt. Freedom from guilt is essential if we are to be fully human & fully alive.

We can't be fully alive if we are unforgiving.

We can't be fully alive if we are unreconciled and in disunity.

All of these factors stand in the way to discovering the superlative freedom and life *plus* that Jesus offers because each one in its own way is a symptom of selfishness and self centredness that makes it impossible for the love God to flow.

I love the allegory of C.S. Lewis in *The Great Divorce* where he describes a group of people – all sorts, who take a bus ride to come into the light. They have to walk quite a way after getting off the bus and they can see distant hills and faintly see the glow of the source of the light they are to enter, but they find that the ground under foot is uncomfortable, even prickly and painful and so they start to question whether or not they should take the journey. Their characters are revealed. Some just grumble and can't see the point, and want to turn back because it's all too much trouble and not worth the effort. One decides that she isn't prepared to leave behind her former life and its self indulgence and lust - certainly she can't see that this painful journey has enough at the end for her to change her ways. Another (a minister) can't see that there is anything more to achieve by persevering with the journey than what he'd already achieved living as a cleric. Another wanted to turn back when she was told that as she approached the light she would have to let go of anger at others who'd wronged her and leave behind her desires for revenge, and she wasn't prepared to do that. For all of these people the ground was hard and horrible to walk on and so it made sense that they turn around and go back. All of these people are self centred and selfish, being only concerned about themselves and unable to look lingering and longingly at the hills ahead.

For others though, those who really wanted to enter into the ultimate presence of the light, they kept focussed on the hills and the glow in the distance and as they got closer the ground got softer underfoot and in due course they could walk with and run and prance. The journey got easier and more enjoyable the closer they got.

The observer in the story makes the profound statement, that there are 2 types of people, those who say to God "Thy will be done" and those to whom God says "*Thy* will be done"! Each of these people took the direction they did by their own free choice and in that sense chose the outcomes for their life. The story makes the point very clear that if we keep our focus on God faithfully and embrace His inviting love and put His call to us in the centre of our lives, then the ground under foot – the journey of our life – the circumstances that we live in, will become easier and we will discover freedom beyond our dreams and an abundance of life that fills us with joy and hope.

Amen

Stan Thorburn