

St Alban's Remembrance Day Address 10 November 2019

A Priest, a Baptist minister and a Rabbi are having coffee, and as men do, they come up with a challenge to prove which of them is best at their job. So, a week later they arrive in a national park, and head off in different directions into the woods to convert a bear.

Afterwards they meet up to see who gets bragging rights.

The priest begins: When I found my bear, I read to him from the Catechism, sprinkled him with holy water and next week is his First Communion."

"I found a bear by the stream," says the Baptist minister, "and so I preached God's holy word to him, and then baptised him there and then."

Then they turn to the Rabbi, who's in a wheelchair, with two broken legs, and his entire body is covered in bruises and scratches. "On reflection," he says, "maybe I shouldn't have started with circumcision."

Why are we here today? We're here to remember those who have created the peace we enjoy today. We're here to remember especially those who paid the supreme sacrifice, giving their lives for the sake of their friends and families and communities.

"Greater love has no one than this to lay down one's life for one's friends." We salute those who made that sacrifice.

And we're doing that in the context of an act of Christian worship – which necessarily challenges us to think about the direction of our own lives before Almighty God.

I saw a story of a Marine called Paul Tribus. He won two purple hearts serving in the war-torn jungles of Vietnam, and while he was there his life changed forever as the hill he was defending was overrun, with mortar shells and tracer rounds exploding all round him, he cried out to God saying:

"I'm not ready to die yet, help me!"^[1]

In that instant he felt something change inside him, not a great flash of light or anything like that, but it changed the direction of his life forever.

There's an old saying, "There are no atheists in foxholes." It's certainly the case that we are more likely to think about God at times of crisis in our lives. And if I'm honest, that's as true of vicars as anyone else. But, the great promise of the Bible is that what God has for us in Jesus works not just in a foxhole, or any other hole we fall into – but it actually works for the whole of life.

Now at this point you might be thinking "Get real, the Jesus and the Bible has no relevance to my life." Maybe you've tried church and it's failed you, let you down, hurt you. It saddens me to say this as a church leader, but churches are very good at turning themselves into private members' clubs.

Or maybe it isn't church you struggle with, but life itself. Maybe the questions your life throws up are so complex you can't imagine how the Bible can speak into them.

At the beginning of WW2, every British soldier was given a copy of the New Testament with a message from King George VI written in it. He wrote, "To all serving in my forces by sea or land, or in the air, and indeed, to all my people engaged in the defence of the Realm, I commend the reading of this book. For centuries the Bible has been a wholesome and strengthening influence in our national life, and it behoves us in these momentous days to turn with renewed faith to this Divine source of comfort and inspiration."

"What's life all about?". Let me give you a run-down of some questions we struggle to answer:

Why is life so short?

Why don't the good times last?

Why education and learning are good, but can't give us all the answers.

Why doesn't money make me happy?

Why doesn't sex give more than temporary pleasure?

Why do fools often get into positions of power? [Insert your own Donald Trump joke here]

Why do some people enjoy fame and fortune, only to waste it all?

Why do I never seem to win anything at all?

Why does a man often work hard all his life, only to lose everything?

Why do people retire with great dreams and then fall seriously ill the next day?

I wanted to see what was good for people to do ...during the few days of their lives.

So what is it to life? Enjoy the good things God has given.

I have come that you may have life in all its fullness" (John 10:10).

And he lived it! Do you know the story of the wedding Jesus turned up at in Cana in Galilee? He served them well. I also treated myself after the Christmas Fayre yesterday.

So enjoy the good things God has given you.

Life is full of times and seasons, including a time for war and a time for peace. And when war comes, each of us faces a choice about how we serve our generation.

But you know, enjoying life to the max, and being ambitious and serving others – good as those things are – they aren't the meaning of our lives. You see, when we're truly honest with ourselves – the things we've achieved, our grand designs, the relationship we're so proud of, the wealth we've amassed – they don't actually address our greatest fears.

There's nothing we can achieve in this life that overcomes: the fear of death, or the fear of discovering our life has been a waste, or the fear that everything we've done is worthless, or the fear of being forgotten...

Deep down we all want something that lasts! And the Bible tells us "Anyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." (Romans 10:13)

"Fighting McKenzie" was a WWI Padre, loved by his soldiers because he was always with them in danger. Though often ordered back, he would always reappear at the front line to encourage the living and minister to the dying.

During one particularly hot battle, he came across a badly wounded soldier, obviously beyond help. "Padre," the soldier cried in anguish, "do you know a Catholic prayer?" "I think I do, my boy," replied Mac with great tenderness. "Say this after me, son: 'God be merciful to me a sinner... I now lay my sins on Jesus.'" With great difficulty, and obviously in pain, the boy nevertheless whispered the words as Padre Mac held his hand, and with the peace of God upon his face the young soldier passed away.[2]

But you don't have to wait for your deathbed to know that peace. Jesus offers peace to us today. For the whole of life. A peace with God that passes beyond our understanding and lasts into eternity. [pause]

Now I don't know how you feel about that offer.

Some of you will already have responded. That's great – thank God for Jesus!

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