

In that most beautiful and familiar part of John's Gospel – the Prologue – we learn that in the Word that existed with God before all time: in that Word was Life, and the Life was the Light of all people. To me, the curious thing about this passage is the way in which the author moves immediately from writing about Life to a much more easily used and understood image – that of Light. We know that the words of John's Gospel give witness to a life-long period of thought, prayer and reflection on the events of the life of Jesus and their meaning, so you'd have thought he could write something more directly about Life, yet as soon as Life enters into the picture, he resorts to other images to indicate what he means.

This should not be especially surprising. For me it's significant that in 178 episodes spread over seven years, the authors of *Star Trek: the Next Generation* returned again and again to the theme of what exactly *is* life. As the crew encounters new phenomena all the time, it isn't always clear whether something is alive or not. They take with them inherited definitions of life and sometimes have to develop their own. They discover life in micro-organisms that inhabit a space between rocks on an otherwise dead planet; they encounter signs of life in robotic organisms that develop a sense of self-preservation; their own ship's computer becomes a living entity for a time, and most dramatically, their own second officer, Commander Data, who is a uniquely self-aware and capable android (an intelligent robotic simulation of a human being) has his own claims to life and personhood challenged from time to time – all of which causes the viewer to join in asking the question: What really *is* life?

The ideas that come into play include sentience, self-awareness, intelligence, the ability to reproduce – yet we find that in this particular vision of the future there is no commonly accepted universal definition of life which fits the variety of circumstances that the imaginations of the authors can conceive. Maybe the writers of John's Gospel and the beloved disciple whose witness they are communicating – maybe they are avoiding a definition of life with good reason.

Life as a theme of course recurs throughout the Gospel. Jesus talks with Nicodemus about being born again; he talks of his body and blood as the key to being raised on the Last Day, as the means by which we can have life in him; in the raising of Lazarus he engages in the interplay between life and death; and as I tried to tease out yesterday evening, for John the cross is not a dead end but a means by which life continues when the complex system that is the human body finally fails and falls apart. And of the two conclusions written in John's Gospel, the first sets out clearly the purpose of the Gospel to bring life to those of us who hear it: *Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.*

The Catechism I was made to learn as a small child included the only questions I can still recite by heart: 'Who made me? God made me. Why did God make me? God made me to know him, love him and serve him in this world, and to be happy with him for ever in the next.'

This is a notably different approach from the catechism of the Book of Common Prayer, and while I like both of them, I find the immediate shifting of the focus on self, which is necessary as a starting-point for anything to do with a small child, straight onto a focus on my relationship with God, to be a healthy and helpful thing. It isn't immediately about the specific stuff I have to do as part of the structure of religious faith within the Church, but it is about the primacy of a relationship with God through all of that, and it puts into the centre what the Book of Common Prayer keeps largely implicit – that the most important thing for a Christian is to be consciously a child of God.

Some of the most interesting theology of the second half of the twentieth century is built on making sense of the new insights into person and personality brought about in psychology and sociology, and applying them to our understanding of God as Trinity – three Persons in one God. There remains a tendency to look on the human person as a self-standing individual, independent of all others, and to see us defining ourselves as different from everyone else. That sort of hankering after total independence comes naturally to a loner like myself, and it is I think a cause of much of the unhealthiness in today's society. The second creation story in the Book of Genesis gives us a clue on this insight, when God says 'It is not good for the man to be alone'.

For all the faults of previous generations which we might think we have overcome, there was never too much illusion about self-sufficiency. I suggested yesterday that attitudes and practices around death were much healthier when they involved the extended family and close local community. Even the most privileged people of the past could be confronted with the poetry of such as John Donne:

No man is an island,
Entire of itself,
Every man is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.
If a clod be washed away by the sea,
Europe is the less.
As well as if a promontory were.
As well as if a manor of thy friend's
Or of thine own were:
Any man's death diminishes me,
Because I am involved in mankind,
And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;
It tolls for thee.

The various texts in Scripture that reveal the presence, existence and role of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, which then provide a basis for the teaching hammered out in the first centuries of the Church's existence, and handed down to us – these texts never allow us to see Father, Son or Holy Spirit entire of themselves. This is of course because they are not entire of themselves – they live for and through each other – and, most important for what I am trying to say this evening, they can only find their lives in concert with each other. And being made in God's image I have become happy – loner as I am – with the reality that the person I am is defined by my relationships with God and with the people I serve in God's name. That is where I find life. Without those relationships I become a sort of shadow person and what I call my life becomes empty and has no purpose. This may explain why when I am on holiday – though I am happy enough with my own company – I spend so much time observing other people, listening to what they talk about, and imagining their lives. Being in relationship with God and with other people is what life is all about.

This is why Christians should be in the business of supporting and preserving life, encouraging people and the whole of creation to grow and to flourish. The centuries-long commitment of the churches to education at every level is a part of this, and so is the current concern for the welfare of creation and the elimination of the destructive impact of human activity upon the balance of created things.

In all this let us be sure that whatever we do is done in humility. The problems caused by human activity are largely due to a level of human arrogance, often supported by quoting bits from the scriptures, that has led us to think that the world exists simply for us. It does not. The above-mentioned arrogance is part

of what is traditionally called Original Sin. Instead of imposing itself on the earth, humankind is called to live in harmony and mutual relationship with the other forms of life we find here.

In his encyclical letter *Laudato sii*, drawing on the same Canticle of Saint Francis with which I began yesterday's address, Pope Francis hails the earth as the Sister with whom we share our life and the Mother who opens her arms to embrace us. He then writes:

This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life. This is why the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor; she "groans in travail" (Rom 8:22). We have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the earth (cf. Gen 2:7); our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters.

While it is obvious that for some this has become the latest cause for them to protest about, and when another one comes along no doubt it will lose its attraction, and it is also true that if humankind makes the earth uninhabitable for itself, the planet's ecosystems are more than strong enough to reset themselves, it is incumbent on us as made in the image of the Creator to live in a harmonious relationship not just with one another but with the whole of the creation of which we are a part. This too is what life means. And we should be consciously seeking to be in relationship with all those things that make life worth living.

This afternoon I saw an image that brings this home to me. There are – for better or for worse – usually beggars of some variety around the main entrances of the big Tesco on Lockoford Lane. The one I encountered on my way out of there this afternoon was sandwiched between two magnificent dogs – one a beautifully groomed rough collie, and the other an attractive blue merle border collie. Lots of things can be said and thought about beggars with dogs that look better kept than themselves, I know, but it was borne in on me that this man was definitely neither cold nor lonely. However complicated his relationship with human society, he was at home in that little bit of creation.

I am also conscious that talk about life and creation can end up being diverted into the worship of fluffy bunnies, or degraded into a series of what some of the people I was a student with used to call 'warm fuzzies'. Real life isn't like that. Just as I suggested yesterday that death is actually shot through with intimations of life, so life is definitely shot through with intimations of death. Writing about Saint Francis, Eric Doyle discerns in his life a series of 'little deaths' whereby he became more and more aware of the things that really mattered in his life. The most cruel of these was, toward the end of his life, the loss of his eyesight, with which he could see the beauty of the things he loved. Yet this too was a reminder to concentrate on the beauty that lasts instead of being limited by the beauty that passes away. These little deaths made Francis more alive!

Sister Wendy Beckett, in her correspondence, makes a similar point as she faces her final illness and decline. She welcomes it as something which will centre her being on the things that really matter. Francis was very much more severe with himself, in accordance with the customs and expectations of his time, yet we should not see his cruel penances as something entirely negative; instead, we should be asking ourselves how they freed him up to focus on the most important relationship of all – that relationship with God that truly brings the fullness of Life.

As yesterday I want to end with a prayer – this time one of the prayers with which Pope Francis concludes *Laudato sii*.

Father, we praise you with all your creatures.
They came forth from your all-powerful hand;
they are yours, filled with your presence and your tender love.
Praise be to you!

Son of God, Jesus,
through you all things were made.
You were formed in the womb of Mary our Mother,
you became part of this earth,
and you gazed upon this world with human eyes.
Today you are alive in every creature
in your risen glory.
Praise be to you!

Holy Spirit, by your light
you guide this world towards the Father's love
and accompany creation as it groans in travail.
You also dwell in our hearts
and you inspire us to do what is good.
Praise be to you!

Triune Lord, wondrous community of infinite love,
teach us to contemplate you
in the beauty of the universe,
for all things speak of you.
Awaken our praise and thankfulness
for every being that you have made.
Give us the grace to feel profoundly joined
to everything that is.

God of love, show us our place in this world
as channels of your love
for all the creatures of this earth,
for not one of them is forgotten in your sight.
Enlighten those who possess power and money
that they may avoid the sin of indifference,
that they may love the common good, advance the weak,
and care for this world in which we live.
The poor and the earth are crying out.

O Lord, seize us with your power and light,
help us to protect all life,
to prepare for a better future,
for the coming of your Kingdom
of justice, peace, love and beauty.
Praise be to you!
Amen.