

## **MORNING SERVICE**

Sunday 7 February 2010, Kilcalmonell, Killean & Kilchenzie

*5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany*

*preacher: Rev Martin Grashoff*

*hymns: Church Hymnary. Fourth Edition (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2005)*

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### **Welcome & Intimations**

**Opening Hymn** : 'Oh the life of the world' (CH 141)

### **Children's Talk**

**Children's Hymn** : 'All things bright and beautiful' (CH 137)

### **Prayer & Lord's Prayer**

We thank you, O God,  
for the life of the world –  
for food, and drink, for a roof over our heads,  
for family, friends and colleagues,  
for music, film and arts,  
for school and work and time off,  
for all these day-to-day matters  
through which again and again  
something becomes visible or tangible  
of that indestructible future you promise:  
peace and justice for all.  
We know that this will not come without a cost,  
we know that it will be realised  
in the midst of strife and turmoil –  
no lovely harmony we can expect.  
But still:  
the life you give, O God,  
will last for ever.  
Therefore, with your people  
of all places and times,  
with human beings and angels,  
with saints and sinners,  
with all that lives on earth  
we praise your Name:

Our Father...  
...Amen.

**Readings** : Exodus 1:8-19 & Luke 9:23-27 (*Good News Bible*)

**Hymn** : 'Will you come and follow me' (CH 533)

### **Sermon**

Today's readings are about the ultimate questions of human existence: life and death. These are the questions about why we are on earth, or in this cosmos, and why we have to leave it at some point. And there are no fitting answers to these questions – at least not with the kind of certainty we would like to have.

We do not know where we come from or where we go to. Not really. Any image we may have about the afterlife, is indeed imagination. The most important thing however, is not to look before or after our life on earth, but at that very life itself.

So what is the meaning of life? We could ask Monty Python to explain it once more, but the first example I could think of, is our son Arnold when he was 3 years old.

It was a rainy day and at some point we wondered where he would be. He had – still has – a talent for adventure. Like that time he was sitting in the middle of the main road, on his pedal tractor, among all the cars racing homeward at rush hour. On that rainy day we could not find him anywhere. Until I heard a intensely content, big sigh. There he was: behind the hedge, in the rain, sitting in a muddy puddle and covering himself with rain and mud. He was clearly very wet, very dirty, but moreover very happy.

It was a moment we will never forget. And while we were cycling and camping we have had more of these precious moments. That is: looking back I realise we had, but at the time they seemed so common that we hardly noticed. But the picture is so clear! Anyone has seen this, because all children are the same on this. Even if they are orphans, without enough food or great expectations, they can play and simply *live*. We all have seen it.

The fundamental questions of life, which we cannot answer, actually come back to this: the moments we simply and fully enjoy life as it comes. No worries, no fears, no targets to achieve, nothing needed but the few things we have at hand.

Of course these moments are just flashes. They cannot last and we can never organise them. Yet, they teach us the lesson we already learned before we could even speak: just trust, just live, everything will be alright. Anything we might want to add to this – thoughts, revelations, beliefs or whatever – come on top of this.

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We have enjoyed a few days in London. We really did. However, getting back to Argyll was even better. Seen from a huge city like London nothing happens in Kintyre. The city is jammed with people and buildings and actions and emotions. We stayed with a friend in her convent, which was a very peaceful place. But also in their beautiful garden you could hear the traffic and the airplanes leaving from or landing at

Heathrow.

These moments we simply know that life is good can easily be covered under all the hassle of a city. A lot of your attention and energy is absorbed by what you see and hear and have to decide on. Even in the convent life was busy.

But still these flashes of real life are there. It takes more effort to notice, but they are there over a cup of coffee, in music played after a sermon, in a bird singing in the garden.

Nevertheless, it is much easier to pay attention when you are in Kintyre. No traffic, no masses of people, no constant noise, but the stillness of a dark night or the silver light of the morning over Islay. Living here does not resolve the problems of life, but it helps you to be more attentive to what really counts.

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The people of Israel found themselves in dire straits. A Pharaoh who did not know Joseph, hard labour, an insidious genocide. But what can you do about it? Four thousand years ago things were pretty much the same as today. Those in power are very hard to control and too often they abuse their power at the cost of many without power. The power and the glory: two dark sides of human history that just do not go away.

The story in Exodus does not answer our questions. We do not hear why the Jews were singled out, while there were many other people threatening to Pharaoh's power, and probably more seriously too. Nor are we presented with a method to end abuse of power.

But there is this story about the midwives, with a lot of humour in it. It is as if life itself vibrates in it. The midwives are the heroes. They mock the mighty king of Egypt. Their very practical wisdom really preserves life. They have telling names. Siphrah means 'beauty', and Puah means 'groaner' (like someone pushing in labour). The beauty of every new life and the hard labour to make it be born are included. Such is life: beautiful and laborious.

The Pharaoh is so smug. He thinks he is the wise guy. But in fact he cannot even control two midwives. He thinks he can make the people of Israel extinct by killing the boys. Silly man. You are Jewish because your mother is. Fathers are not that important. Had the Pharaoh been truly wise he would have gone for the girls.

Pharaoh also thinks that brute force will save him. His so-called wisdom is lethal. Kill the babies! But in fact he is simply outplayed by Siphrah and Puah. The people of Israel are delivered by the midwives and their hope and future is secured by newborn babies. It's a wonderful story filled with laughter and life.

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The future of Israel is about God's promises, about a covenant, about faith, and all these big and somewhat distant words. But how is this future revealed? In babies being born, in parents taking care, in a community that refuses to accept death and destruction.

Answers to the big questions of life and death are very hard to find. Probably we will not find them. But instead we should learn to look different. If we can see life as pure and simple as we could when we were children, we know what life is about. Perhaps we also have sensed how that simple experience of the joy of life connects us to all people of all times and places. Ultimately it even connects us to the One source of life, which we call God.

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This is what Jesus tries to teach his disciples. Life is not just the biological thing. Nor is it something spiritual outside our daily reality. Life is what we receive, but we cannot control it. There cannot be any spiritual life without our biological existence, and it is very unhealthy to separate one from another. But we cannot control our biological existence.

At the end of our life the same questions from the very beginning return. Why are we on earth and why do we have to leave again? Being born was without our control, but so is death. Medically we can tinker a lot, but that does not really change the facts.

If we frantically try to preserve our human life, demanding everything to be done for that, we might easily lose the plot. But if we can stay connected to that other side of life, the simple joy and strength of life, especially when our body and mind are running out of time, then we can cope better. Carrying a cross might release us from our fear for death. Then we are connected to the life that, as Jesus promises, is not exclusively bound to our biological existence.

The most difficult choices we may need to make are about life and death. New laws are needed to protect people while they make the best possible choice for their particular situation. Mercy is more important than being in control. Love is more important than any principle or doctrine. But any choice about life and death can only be made when we connect to the kind of life that connects all creatures to each other and to their Creator. The pure joy of life.

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Arnold did not see any danger, sitting on his pedal tractor in the middle of a busy road. Of course we told him that it was very dangerous. But the most important thing was that he did not have fear and just accepted life as it was. Likewise he totally enjoyed the wonder of rain and mud. Yes, he did get a bit of a cold, I think. But then again: life is strong if it is enjoyed and accepted as a good gift.

May we choose and enjoy life. For the sake of God who grants us life, now and for ever. Amen.

**Hymn** : 'New every morning is the love' (CH 214)

### **Offering and Dedication**

#### **Prayer of Intercession**

We pray, O God of life,  
for this earth and all who are in it,  
that she may feed and house each of them,  
that all may share in the good life  
which you create anew from day to day.  
In prayer we remember  
the refugees around the world,  
in Haiti, Darfur, Israel and Palestine,  
as well as in our own country;  
we remember the homeless in our cities;  
the children slaving in sweatshops  
and the children abused in Britain;  
we remember dictators in too many countries across the globe  
and those in power whom we elected.  
We do not pray that you will set all things right.  
but that you grant us the courage and vision  
to do whatever we can, as small as it may be,  
so that against the flow of indifference and egoism  
your justice and peace may shine  
like stars in the night,  
like flowers in a wasteland.

In silence we remember those  
we know need us  
to remember them.  
(*silence*)

So we pray to God who gives life  
through Jesus who is our light and our life,  
with the Spirit connecting all life.  
Amen.

**Closing Hymn** : 'Let all creation dance' (CH 149)

### **Blessing**