

Sermon: Seventh Sunday in Easter: 28 May 2017

*Jesus said, "And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (John 17.3).*

This is eternal life: to know Jesus Christ and to know the God who sent him. This *is* eternal life – not the way to eternal life, not the thing we have to do so we can get there. It is it. All of it.

But what does "eternal" mean anyway? We hear that word and we so easily jump to the hereafter. We think it's the life that starts after we die. Which is understandable, since the life we live in these mortal bodies obviously does not last eternally. So we think of this life as mortal and the next life as eternal. But the word here used is more accurately (if also more awkwardly), "eons-long" life, life that endures through the eons. It is the life that lasts through this life, through all ups and down, through difficulties, setbacks, growth and change. It is so strong that it lasts even through death and continues beyond the limits of time, with God forever. It is the life that really is life.

So, when as Christians we speak of eternal life, we're speaking of that thing we all long for when we throw up our hands and wonder "what's the point of it all anyway?" or when we question what our purpose is or whether our life really matters. These moments of longing and frustration point us onward to that enduring and meaningful life we were made for. When we speak of eternal life, we're speaking of that thing we experience when we realize with gratitude the value of life (or of a relationship) even in the face of terrible circumstances. We're speaking of the conviction that there is more to life than meets the eye.

There are so many ways to describe and understand this true life for which we were all made. Here, at a very emotional and intimate point in John's Gospel, we have a description of perfect simplicity: to know Jesus Christ and to know the God who sent him.

The setting is the Last Supper, where Christ knows he is about to be betrayed and crucified, where he is saying goodbye to his beloved disciples. Jesus is praying for his disciples, but the evangelist uses this prayer to offer us a glimpse through to the other side of the cross, when Christ has completed the work for which he came. The cross is very much in view, but John portrays it not as shame or defeat, but as glory, as the perfect revelation of God and of God's love for us. So it is in the light of the cross and its glory that John gives us this description of eternal life. It is a simple description, but it is overflowing with meaning and worth dwelling on: to know Jesus Christ and to know the God who sent him.

To know God – the only true God – is to know that, beyond ourselves, beyond anything we control and beyond any circumstances of this world, there is goodness, truth and beauty – giving shape and order and life to us and to all things. To know God is to know that the center of our life lies beyond ourselves and that this same God is the center of all life.

To know Jesus Christ is to know that this God is love – self-giving, all-embracing, pain-transforming love. To know Jesus Christ is to know that the purpose and meaning and value which we long for in life is fulfilled in living this love ourselves – or, more precisely, letting Christ live this love in and through us. To know Jesus Christ is to know that the life that is worth living is a life that loves all people confidently, knowing that, even if that love is repaid with hate, it has the power to transform and redeem the one who is loved as well as the one who loves.

This is eternal life. This is the life to which the church bears witness. This is the life that Christ gives to the world. It is God's mission, through Christ, to bring the whole world into this true and eternal life of love.

The last few days, our diocesan synod met in Halifax to discuss the life and business of the church. There was a lot of talk about mission. This seems to be a

hot topic in the church these days, and we might dare to hope that talk and reflection on God's mission would always be central to the church's business.

As we continue to have these discussions in the diocese and here in this parish, we must hold firm to the heart of this mission: "that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." Everything that the church does is oriented to this one goal. Everything that the church does is mission.

Knowledge of God and of Jesus Christ comes through love that points beyond ourselves, to its source. We are here in this place to share that love, as we share the bread and wine that make us one in that love. We study the scriptures to understand that love in all the complexity and simplicity of its working out through history. We serve our families, communities and world to practise that love and to see it take root in the lives of all.

I say we must hold firm to the heart of this mission because the reading we had this morning from Acts gives just one early example of a pattern the church has often fallen into when we focus on "mission." The disciples ask the risen Christ, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" Our versions include: "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to the church? ... when you will restore the crowds of people to these pews? ... when you will restore honour and respectability and authority to the church in our society?" Nor do we stop at wondering about "the time." We also ask, "Lord, is this the program that will bring young people back to church? Is this the music that will appeal to families? Is this the new 'style' of worship service that will make the church 'relevant' again?"

Christ's answer to the disciples is also for us: "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But... you will be my witnesses." This is our role in God's mission, to be witnesses to Christ's transforming and redeeming love in our lives and in the world. The kingdom is God's; it is not ours. Thanks be to God for that.

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Amen