

Sunday 30<sup>th</sup> April 2023; Easter 4 - Benefice HC, Stonegrave

John 10:1 - 10

The final words of our Gospel reading today, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.”

In the third century the Christian Saint Irenaeus of Lyons wrote, “The glory of God is a human being fully alive”.

Certainly, some words to reflect on, especially when we think about our relationships within the church community and our witness to the wider world. So, who or what are the thieves, robbers, killers, and destroyers?

On one level there is the physical world. We clearly see the thieves and destroyers there, be it the intentional actions of human beings in how we treat our world and our fellow human beings. Or the things out of our control; natural disaster, suffering and disease, one of the most insidious killers of course being cancer. Many times, as a palliative care chaplain I witnessed the destruction of a beautiful person who had enjoyed life in its fullness, reduced to a physical and emotional wreck as they lost their battle with cancer and who looked at me with tear-filled eyes and asked ‘Why?’

Then there are the non-physical thieves and destroyers, the ones who kill others emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. Are you or I one of those? Quite a challenging question which requires an honest examination. The first response may be like Peter when he was challenged about being a follower of Jesus, ‘Not I’ he said, three times, until the cockerel crowed to remind him. We can all fall like Peter and many a time we too can become the thieves and destroyers by not allowing another person to be fully alive. Instead of thanking, praising, and celebrating one another in love, sometimes it is seemingly easier to do the opposite, to resist change,

to hang on to a sense of power, to criticize, to speak negatively, to reject loving kindness and hospitality when it is offered freely, to dwell in the past in some imagined golden age and move on in faith in the present. A thoughtless, selfish response can easily steal, or destroy another person's sense of worth and value and cause them to feel rejected and broken and leave them in abject despair.

All these are the actions and attitudes of the "thieves and robbers" who "steal, kill, and destroy", who steal that which does not belong to them, who kill the trust of those who believe in joy, who destroy faith and turn people away from the life that is found in Jesus Christ. Jesus tells us. He calls all people to hear His voice and it is our responsibly to include and never exclude anyone, to welcome and not to shun, to receive graciously and not to judge or condemn. Ask yourself today, have you offered welcome to everyone you have encountered? Have you accepted graciously another's kindness and hospitality offered to you? Have you in words, actions and thoughts sought to offer the life of abundance we find in Christ?

How do we prevent ourselves slipping into these actions and conveying the wrong message? Firstly, cultivate and maintain your personal relationship with Jesus by spending time in prayer, Bible study, and reflection so to grow closer to Him and become more familiar with His voice. Secondly, fully participate in a faith community, as described in our reading from Acts today. Be willing to change, to grow in faith, learn from others, and be willing to be called out if necessary and be held accountable for your behaviour and the effect it has on others. A supportive community can help you stay focused on Jesus' teachings and provide encouragement as you follow his guidance. Thirdly, celebrate and share the message of Jesus with others, not just in words but in actions and loving deeds and relationships. As followers of the Good Shepherd, we have a responsibility to share the good news of Jesus and the abundant life he gives us with those around us. Look for opportunities to share

your faith and invite others to experience the love of Jesus. Finally, embrace the abundant life Jesus offers with Joy! Express the fullness of life that Jesus promises in celebration, spiritual growth, deep relationships, purposeful living, and joy. Seek to embrace these aspects of the full and abundant life in your daily walk with Jesus, and trust that he will lead you on the best path.

Jesus comes to bring abundant life to His people. “The Greek word for ‘abundance,’ perissos, has a mathematical meaning and generally means a surplus. So too, Jesus brings the surplus as abundant life, not just existing but life, which is above all the blessed life, in which our contentment is based. It is based upon the fact that God is equal to every situation and can supply all our needs according to His riches and glory in Christ Jesus. Abundant life isn’t necessarily an especially long life, or even an easy, comfortable life, but it is a life of satisfaction and contentment, and joy in Jesus.

“Life is a matter of degrees. Some have life, but it flickers like a dying candle, and is indistinct as the fire in the smoking flax; others are full of life and are bright and vehement.”

The preacher and theologian Spurgeon speaks here of the thieves and robbers extinguishing the candle of life, but he speaks too of those who are full of life whos’ candle can never be extinguished. He says, someone with life has stamina, someone with life has energy, someone with life has a large sphere of living, someone with life has an overflow of joy and attraction.

“The glory of God is a human being fully alive”. Irenaeus reminds us of this of the Abundant life that gives honour to the Shepherd and Glory to God from whom all things come and from whom all blessings flow.

Thanks be to God. Amen.