

13 April 2008 Easter 3 A “Dee Dah Day”

Acts 2: 42-47; John 10:1-10

Jesus says, I have come so that you might have life, and have it abundantly. Just the last few weeks I've been reading a book called “The Life you've always wanted: spiritual disciplines for ordinary people” by an American pastor, John Ortberg. One of his chapters he entitles, “A Dee Dah Day: The Practice of Celebration”. And he starts off by telling us how his little girl who's just a toddler has a habit of running round in circles singing: Dee Dah Day, Dee Dah day, Dee Dah Day. He writes: It's a relatively simple dance expressing great joy. When she is too happy to hold it in any longer, when words are inadequate to give voice to her euphoria, she has to dance to release her joy. So she does the Dee Dah Day.

He goes on: “On one particular occasion I'd just got her out of the bath. Mallory had started her dance and I was getting irritated. Mallory, hurry, I prodded. So she did – she began running in circles faster and faster and chanting “dee dah day” more rapidly. No Mallory, that's not what I mean! Stop with the dee dah day stuff, and get over here so I can dry you off. Hurry!”

“Then she asked a profound question: ‘Why?’ I had no answer. I had nowhere to go, nothing to do, no meetings to attend. I was just so used to hurrying, so preoccupied with my own agenda, that here was life, here was joy, here was an invitation to the dance right in front of me – and I was missing it. So I got up, and Mallory and I did the Dee Dah Day dance together. She said I was pretty good at it, too, for a man my age”.

I have come so that you may have life and have it abundantly, says Jesus. C.S. Lewis says: Joy is the serious business of heaven. And the first question of the old catechism used to be: Why did God make you? To which the answer was. God made me to glorify him and to enjoy him for ever.

But our capacity for losing sight of this is almost wilful. Jesus weeps over the people of Jerusalem and us, because we're like sheep without a shepherd, buried in our diaries and our obsessions, maybe feverishly pursuing things that won't actually lead to our happiness no matter what the media might tell us. Twice this week I've answered the phone to a disembodied voice telling me: Congratulations, you have been randomly selected to win a holiday in Florida. But I don't want to go to Florida (they have alligators and hurricanes), in fact I don't want most of the stuff that's offered to me, and I need even less.

The old prayer book used to hit us with this every time we came to Church: We have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep, we have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts, and there is no health in us. Which is all a bit grim, but it's not that far from the mark. Peter, this morning: We were all going astray like sheep, but now we have come back to the shepherd and guardian of our souls.

And Jesus tells us what the mark of a true shepherding is. I always remember there was an episode of Father Ted in which Ted's been accused of behaving like a fascist. “How dare they call me a fascist”, he protests. “Fascists are people who wear black all the time and tell other people what to do”. And William Blake sees false shepherds in the same way, not as joy-bearers and life-givers, but quite the reverse. He writes: “Priests in black gowns were walking their rounds, and binding with briars my joys and desires”.

But Jesus says, don't listen to people like that. Jesus says, listen to my voice and I will lead you to springs of living water, to new pastures, to the nourishment you really need. I am the gateway to the new life you want, I am the way.

All of which might sound great, but you may still be left with the question as to how do *I* hear the voice of the shepherd and follow him into that abundant life in the actual life I'm living now. Timothy Radcliffe explores this very helpfully when he says that what we see in Jesus is a man who took whatever life brought, whatever choices were in front of him, and somehow transformed the whole of it into a gift. "On his last night", he writes, "Jesus had few options open to him, and none of them seemed good. There seemed to be no good choices to make. But he acted creatively. He grasped this betrayal and made of it a gift. And he goes on: Many of us find that we have few options. But with God's grace invigorating our imagination, we can choose creatively, opening up possibilities of which we'd never dreamed. We can grasp our fate and make it a blessing". This, he says, is how we can become free.

But when Jesus really wanted to make the point about how to be free we all know what he did. He would bring a little child right into the middle of all the big grown-up discussions and say: If you want the new life of the kingdom, if you want to know freedom, then you need to see as a child sees – which, is, believe it or not, how God sees.

G.K. Chesterton reflects on this child-like spirit in God when he reminds us how kids never tire of things they delight in: They'll say, do it again, over a story or a game or whatever until you're almost driven crazy. Maybe, he says, this what God is like. "It is possible that God says every morning, "Do it again" to the sun; and every evening, "Do it again" to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but has never got tired of making them. It may be that he has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we."

I am come so that you may have life, says Jesus. He comes to us now, today, so that no matter what else is happening to us, somehow, we can do a kind of dee dah day dance in our hearts, and connect with the joy of our Maker, and live. Amen.

Quotations from:

John Ortberg, *The Life you've always wanted: Spiritual disciplines for ordinary people*. Grand Rapids, Zondervan. 1997.

Timothy Radcliffe, *What is the point of being a Christian?* London, Burns and Oates. 2005.