**Second Sunday of Easter, 11 April 2021**

TAKING HOLD OF LIFE!

'O look, look in the mirror,
   O look in your distress:
Life remains a blessing
   Although you cannot bless.

You may or may not be distressed at the shift in religious values in society – the lack of absolutes – that Auden hints of in his poem. Life has changed and the language about life and ‘God’ has changed rapidly in our lifetimes. Yet life – human life and wider biological life – remains a blessing; there is the sense of its being a gift for which it is heathy to be grateful. Blessing as a sacramental action is not the sure and certain thing for all that once it was. We get by in life with what scraps of ritual we *choose* to retain…

The Auden poem is about life and love and, despite its jaunty metre, it reminds us of mortality – properly the subject of Lent. But we are in the season of Easter and the poem is also about the life we have now: the joy of special moments, of each moment, together with an awareness of the river of life running beneath us and around us – carrying all on its way, whether we care or not.

I am fortunate to be responding also to lectionary readings. The short psalm 133 is on the theme of unity. It so happens that my day job is to be an advocate for local ecumenism, to support those uniting churches that survive – and some of them even thrive, though the immediate outlook for unity and cooperation is not encouraging. The domain of ‘denominational’ Christianity is fractured and divided. Your fellowship is a brave exception: a bold beacon of diversity and inclusiveness.

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The gospel reading dwells on the aftermath of Easter Day as the disciples begin to pick themselves up and try to make sense of life without Jesus. Thomas is berated for his need to have evidence before he believes. In the thought-world of John, he is somewhat of a fall guy, an anti-hero. The gospel-writer tells us that it is in believing *without* evidence that we can have “life”. And life is the linking theme for me: life that can be such a blessing if we can take hold of it and celebrate it for itself: this life.

Another New Testament writer, also known as John, reflected in his first letter on the time they had shared with Jesus:

*We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life.*

What we have touched with our own hands: it was claimed recently, as the newspapers have marked the anniversary of the beginning of lockdown, that the only sense that is essential to human life is touch. Sight, hearing, smell, and taste are very good to have – enhancements of life – but life that is without touch, without contact with other humans, can be debilitating. We have concerns for mental health in countries that have suffered longer lockdowns than we have.

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Today is the second Sunday of Easter. The Easter season lasts for seven Sundays and seven weeks and it is (or was) the highlight of the Christian year. The second Sunday is also known as Low Sunday in contrast to the high feast of last week. If you had a settled minister, she would likely take this Sunday off – so you would have to put up with a stand-in preacher anyway!

In churches, we meet *every* Sunday, not just in the Easter season, because Sunday marks the day of resurrection – of life renewed, life taken up again, life taken up in the name of the fallen leader, the rabbi who was executed by the Romans as a troublemaker.

We meet every Sunday and there is certain value in repetition. We know that Catholic Christians value the repetition of words, but all Christians share this habit of meeting regularly – a habit that was challenged by the lockdown of late March to early June last year. On the Sundays of that period, as on every other day, the streets were almost empty of cars. Indeed, I recall the eerie feeling of Good Friday last year, when every supermarket and doctor’s surgery was closed, and there was no excuse at all for being out on the road at all.

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The repetition of Sunday observance is also valuable in keeping in touch with one another in a seamless way. As an example, I recall my involvement in the preparation for an anniversary event at a church where I was minister. We were planning the 125th anniversary of the church in a small Kent village. It was important to us to involve the wider village. And the church was important to the villagers, although this did not extend to the attending the church services. The congregation was mainly drawn from a wider area.

We invited a village resident to one of our planning meetings and shared with him what we imagined was involved in getting the anniversary events organised. He said, rather gloomily, that they had tried community events before, that it was hard work knocking on doors; people were either not at home, or not responsive to the idea. He implied that we would struggle to get people engaged. “But we meet every Sunday in church, week in, week out”, we said, “so we have no difficultly in consulting and making plans together.” It struck me then what a subtle gift of life it was: to have the habit of meeting so regularly. Whatever our motive for meeting, the result is the blessing of connectedness. It was in that church that we developed this statement of faith:

Faith is experienced rather than learned. Being part of (St. John's) Church enables us:

* *to celebrate what is good in life*
	+ - *to explore Jesus' way of love*
			* *to share the biblical witness to the Spirit's working*

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As today’s gospel reading begins, it is the evening of Easter Day, when Thomas is not with them. And then, a week later, the disciples are together again with Thomas present. On both occasions, the doors are shut – locked, for fear of reprisals. We meet with the doors unlocked and we are certainly open to visitors.

The phrase ‘kingdom of God’ is rare in John’s gospel, but there are eighteen references to ‘eternal life’. Both phrases have been taken by many readers to refer to some sort of after-life. But closer reading suggests that eternal life is *not* life in some future eternity. Rather it is the life of eternity, the life of all the ages, experienced *here and now*. The final chapters of the gospel tackle the transition that the disciples must make from having Jesus living with them, to living the life of Jesus in their own lives.

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I like your practice of encouraging contemporary readings – even if my choice is over 80 years old! When I was minister at St Andrew’s in Hastings, we would also include non-biblical readings, believing that “God is still speaking”, that there is so much of spiritual value to discover in the world of today. My guru (and Lloyd’s good friend), Don Cupitt, (who encouraged the formation of the UK Sea of Faith), commented how people used to worry about the secularization of religion, when what’s going on is rather the sacralization of life. That is, it’s not so much that religion gets more worldly, but that life comes to be perceived as holy in itself, as a blessing.

“*… there is modern religious thought, already going on outside the church*” he said.“*… in particular, the recent changes in the meaning and use of the word ‘life’ amount to a major religious event.*”

The big change highlighted in progressive circles, that many churches have not caught up with, is that the religious object is no longer far off, remote, disjointed from the real world of work and leisure. Indeed, we seem not to have much use for god-talk at all. Our everyday language shows us that we are much more comfortable (and authentic) in speaking about ‘life’ and how it is treating us. We are immersed in life – there is nothing else – and the religious function is to interpret our life as sacred and to help us to explore the big questions of life. You only live once so you need an aim, a mission, a purpose in life.

This is religious talk, but in the language of everyday. Ordinary language does deal with the traditional theological concerns: we ask what is life-enhancing; we can be challenged to change our whole attitude to life; that life has lessons to teach us. If we can respond to these challenges, we are grateful to be alive and we can proclaim that life is good. We can have the time of our lives. The fourth gospel especially would agree that we should live life to the full – that is what Jesus was about. Don’t let life pass you by.

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So, I trace a thread of ‘life’ in the readings for today. The Easter season, of course, is about life – life here and now. And life is only fully realised in conjunction with others, in our connectedness, in community. The unity psalm celebrates that. And life in community was what Jesus was very much about.

The Gospel of John, for all its ethereal tone, encourages us to live life here and now – to live life in all its fullness. Countless other literary creations – poems, plays, novels, operas, films – many encourage us to celebrate life – its heights and depths, its joys and woes.

Auden celebrates joy in this life. His pessimism is deceptive. You can be a joyful pessimist. To celebrate life to the full, we need a healthy realism, not a pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die attitude. There was a clever Christian Aid slogan coined many years ago but still in use in Britain. And I hope it can be our creed too: that we believe in life *before* death.

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