**Sermon (*picture 1*): The Good Life**

# Romans 12:9-21 (NIVUK)

Matthew 16:21-28 (NRSV)

So, I imagine that if I were to ask you what the “Good Life” is then a fair few of you would be thinking of something like this…! (*pic 2*) – ah, lovely Felicity Kendell!

The idea of the “good life”, however, is not just attributable to a classic BBC comedy series. It’s a phrase that stands at the heart of much of our discussions and deliberations about how we should live, and I certainly see it at the heart of our Bible readings this morning.

So, what is “the good life”? La Dolce Vita? Or perhaps the Greek, “Eudaimonia”? Well, these are all phases that can be used to describe that which gets the very best out of us – the fulfilment of our abilities, or perhaps better, the fulfilment of our very nature. It is a concept that many philosophers have obsessed over, wondering what it is that we are capable of as human beings and speculating as to how we might achieve such a standard.

The famous Greek thinkers, Plato & Aristotle, wrote extensively on this subject, wondering about quite how such a state of human flourishing might be achieved (*pic 3*).

For Plato, the very best that we can be is found in our relationship with that which is beyond us – what he called “The form of the Good”. Whereas for Aristotle, knowledge, virtue and goodness were not to be located up there, but rather, down here on earth, as Raphael’s famous picture shows us.

What we find in our gospel reading can perhaps be understood as a recreation of this picture, but with Jesus in the role of Plato and Aristotle represented by Peter. Jesus is focused on His Father in Heaven, but Peter keeps being distracted by the things of this world.

Perhaps a more accurate depiction of Peter, would be to have his finger constantly changing in direction – sometimes pointing upwards, sometimes pointing down, and perhaps sometimes pointing at us! Peter is human and he struggles to maintain his faith, sometimes seeing very clearly, but at other times, failing to focus at all.

If we think back to last week’s gospel reading (*pic 4*), we find Peter full of insight – given the clarity to identify Jesus as Messiah and Son of God. Jesus gives thanks for this vision and tells Peter that he is the rock upon which He will build His church. Peter is clearly pointing upwards at this point, but only a few verses later, his thoughts and concerns have dramatically shifted and once again he is firmly fixed in the world, the finger pointing downwards as he tries to dissuade Jesus from the way that takes Him to Jerusalem, suffering and death. He wants to keep Jesus here and expects Jesus to conquer – perhaps repeating the age-old hope of a Warrior King (*pic 5*) – a new David – coming to overthrow the Romans and restore Israel.

Peter’s shift from inspired man of faith to fearful man of the world is quite startling, but shouldn’t really come as a great surprise to any of us. Peter is simply revealing his humanity and the flaws that are revealed in him can be found in each and every one of us. And, again unsurprisingly, he carries on exhibiting the same mixture of faithfulness, doubt and misunderstanding throughout his life.

(*pic 6*) In the very next section of the gospel, Peter witnesses the full glory of God on the Mount of Transfiguration and yet, even after this revelation, this unquestionable image of everything pointing upwards, he is quickly pointing down again, wanting to keep Jesus in that place for himself. Obviously, Peter will soon famously make three denials that he knows Jesus at all and even at the end of his life, (*pic 7*) tradition tells of how he fled Rome when threatened by the Emperor Nero, only turning around when seeing a vision of Jesus journeying back to Rome.

Peter had seen and did recognise that the good life was to be found in following Jesus – he left everything to do this and, ultimately, gave his life - and yet the temptation to give in to the concerns of the world was often too much for him to resist.

By the world’s standards, both in Peter’s time and today, “the good life” is that which brings about wealth and power and comfort (*pic 8*). For us, it’s holidays, big houses, expensive cars, a top job, top grades, bragging rights about family, prospects and appearance. That which is “good” is generally defined by how much pleasure it brings and “life” refers simply to the time we get here on earth.

And if conventional wisdom about the need to forever grow the economy, to look a certain way and present a certain lifestyle are to be believed, this would seem to make good sense, as much now as it did 2000 years ago.

And yet, what Jesus implores His followers to do is give up such ambition and, instead, to take up the cross…(*pic 9*) “*If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me*.”

To many today, this would not seem like much of an exchange – letting go of easy, obvious pleasure in return for some vague promises about repayment in an undefined future! It is hard to see the “good” in this life and as we know, many in the West struggle to see an attraction.

So, is “the good life” for Christians just one of unavoidable suffering? Well, it might be – at least in this life. The point is that if we are to trust that Jesus presents us with an example that reflects the will of God, and that God is the very source, the very definition of all that is good, then “the good life” is unquestionably that which follows the way of Jesus. (*pic 10*)

And if that way leads us to a place of suffering, then that is something we must be willing to accept – because no other option is as good. As Christians, we are called to be faithful to Christ, to God, to “the good” no matter what that entails. As St Paul points out, this is the sacrifice we must make, to let go of that which is not of God in the world and live for Him above all else.

As Paul makes clear, God’s ways are love and love in action is about giving ourselves to others – providing for those in need, being hospitable, accepting all as brothers and sisters, being quick to forgive, pursuing peace wherever possible and setting a good example to those who haven’t encountered such an understanding of “the good life”.

(*pic 11*) We are each called to live for the good, loving without question and giving without measure, no matter what the circumstances or outcome. Christianity is not a fair-weather faith, it is not easy and there are plenty of more comfortable options, of which I’m sure we’re all very familiar.

But I’m convinced that there is no richer way to live than pursuing “the good life” that Jesus sets before us. And there is no richer future than the promise of complete fulfilment with God for all those who live their lives in love.

Amen