

**Pentecost 18**  
**26/9/2010**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15**

**Psalm 91**

**1 Timothy 6:6-19**

**Luke 16:19-31**

### **On taking hold of life that really is life**

---

In 2003 it was reported that the remains of an early Christian church had been discovered at Megiddo in the Jezreel valley. Several aspects of this were of interest. The find was dated as being earlier than the settlement Constantine made with the church in 318 CE and would have been functioning during a period when it is commonly thought house churches and persecution were the norm. The ruins included a number of beautiful mosaics, which used the symbol of the fish, not the cross, there was a dedication to a woman who had donated “the table” (the word “altar” is not used) and there was a beautiful mosaic that had been donated by a Roman soldier. This was a settled church, of the sort we know, one that had possibly ceased thinking Christ would appear again in its own lifetime. Evidence showed that this church included Jews, Samaritans and Roman soldiers, and apparently it lived comfortably within the Empire.

The writer of Paul’s “pastoral letters” had grappled with what it meant to make the transition from being a missionary movement to a settled church. We know that Jesus never lived in a structured church and that the twelve apostles were not residential clergy, and Paul certainly was not. He was a peripatetic missionary whose “bare knuckled” fight for the Gospel probably meant it would have been impossible for him to stay long in any one place. Paul’s letters to Timothy are regarded as having been written later because the urgent missionary work that was his preoccupation is no longer their focus. The writer had begun to answer the question “what really matters now in the ongoing life of the church?” The answer was *taking hold of life that really is life: keeping the right God-relationship in place* as a basis for right living among the people of God, and the clergy.

There was a report recently on the publication of a book by a psychologist who said that contentment eludes people in our day. We live with all the advantages that the secular culture of our world brings – wealth, travel, communication, gender equality and political freedom - but we are still troubled in spirit. Furthermore, we are becoming increasingly aware that the advantages we enjoy often come at a price that is paid by others in the world.

In Timothy the author sees that there are self-destructive forces at work - cravings that have the power to bring ruin to life and shipwreck to faith. First among them is greed: the love of wealth. On the other hand he is clear the source of real contentment is dwelling in the riches of God. Living by faith is a way of life the implications of which show in us, and in our dealing with others - actions that build up a symbolic treasury of riches in the sight of God. Timothy does not set about rebuking the rich and leaving them with unreal choices. With him it is a matter of challenging them to see where what they have fits within the overall priority of finding real meaning in life. In his words what really matters is setting our hearts on what is certain rather than uncertain, *taking hold of life that really is life*, the life that comes through the

riches of faith. Timothy's church may have been settled and comfortable but even for them, to have the riches of God meant there was a real choice to be made between Christ and the prevailing mores of the day. They did not have to stand before Pilate as Christ had done, but even so, they had to be willing to resist all other distractions and choose life.

The theme of *taking hold of life that really is life* connects with the other readings today. Like Timothy, Luke was concerned about the power of wealth as the story about the rich man and Lazarus shows. This folk tale is told here for a purpose related to faith and is a perfect expression of the Beatitudes: "Blessed are you who are poor for yours is the Kingdom of God" [6:20] and "Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation" [6:24]. The wealth of the rich man blinded him and enabled him to curtain off the reality of life around him, even life at his own gate. He refused to live for anyone but himself and never faced up to that truth. The story set in the afterlife but it is not about that. It is about how not keeping the law of Moses mattered and was a matter of ultimate significance. It is a gift, and a challenge, that the text makes it clear that, rich or poor, here and now we have everything we need to live a life pleasing to God: we have the opportunity to *take hold of life that really is life*. And the subsequent message is that we who have life should seek life for others, not just ourselves.

While he was in prison and the land was under occupation, Jeremiah bought a field. Against all reasonable advice such as financial planners would give he conspicuously engaged in a real estate deal. Everything was done according to the law and traditions of the time, but while the act seemed completely pointless, Jeremiah was making a statement of faith connected with long term realities. He invested in the divine promise, hidden in the last two of the six verbs present in his call. Four verbs declared there would be judgement and destruction but two declared there would be a gift of new life: God's mercy would be at work to bring about restoration and salvation. Jeremiah's purchase of the field of Anathoth was a prophetic sign. The deed in a jar proclaimed that against all odds, the enduring reality in which we live is the promise of God, which offered a new future when no hope of one could be seen. During a siege it was declared that: "houses and fields and vineyards shall be bought again in this land" [32:16]. In prison Jeremiah *took hold of life that really is life*.

Our texts show we have a choice about how we live. How we act makes a difference and it does so on a much bigger screen than we can imagine. Whether or not there is a dividing line for us after death, the meaning is, choosing to live not for ourselves is ultimately significant in the greater scheme of things. As individuals and as a nation we are able to make choices about life and what we do is an investment in the future. What will we put in our deed in a jar? Will it be something that has only relevance to ourselves? Or will we take a bigger view and invest in life for others in such a way that it produces a dividend of life in return?

This is Social Justice Sunday and it is a good moment to reflect on how we as a nation we could think about the choices we make in turning away the boat people fleeing the destruction of wars in other parts of the world. What sort of dividend are we storing up for ourselves by developing offshore processing centres? The approach taken in the post Vietnam era brought us a new level of social and cultural richness, can it not work again, or are we too afraid for that?

And as a congregation what sort of vision do we have for the future? Can we imagine a time in which people will show a lively interest in the church? Can we resist caving into surrounding trends and act now on the basis of hope in God, offering the opportunity for others to take hold of life and discover the blessing and contentment of life in faith that is so elusive in our day?

As a congregation and as citizens of planet earth, may we be bold enough to live from the deeper centre that is given to us by the living God who, in Jesus Christ embodied the life that really is life: life that has the power to make all things new.

\*\*\*