

Sermon preached by Canon Philip Banks
St Edmundsbury Cathedral
Sunday 7 May 2017 – Fourth Sunday of Easter, year A

John 10:10 – I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

I love the story as to how Christianity came to the North of our country. You may know it:

In 7th century the monk Paulinus (ruins of his church students visited each year on his day when I was at theological college in Lincoln 20+years ago) visited King Edwin to persuade him to accept Christianity – on the assumption that if the king did then everyone would. The King called his advisers. One of them addressed the King: “When you sit at table in the winter with your entourage – with a great fire and all is dark and cold outside: it happens that a little bird flies into the hall. It comes in at one door and flies out through the other. “For the moments that it is inside the hall, it does not feel the cold, but as soon as it leaves, it returns to the dark of winter. *It seems to me* that the life of the human person is much the same. We do not know what went before it and we do not know what follows. “If this new faith, Christianity, can speak to us surely of these things – it is well for us to follow it.”

And happily for us they did. They found the answer they sought in the message of Jesus.

“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

Every generation poses the same questions. Computers/phones tablets may go faster, cars may get more clever, science gives us more answers. But our human condition does not change – our need for love and affirmation and community and forgiveness.

And our questions do no change.

Where do we come from? Why are we here? What is the meaning and purpose of life? Why is joy so fleeting ephemeral and how do we handle pain/sickness/death that comes to us all. And the big question. What happens when we die?

In this country for over 1,000 years we have found something of the answer in the person of Jesus who says.

“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

Yes, there’s plenty that remains mystery, but that is precisely where faith comes in. I use my mind and make the leap of faith to what is beyond. That’s the great gift which we have, you and me – the gift of faith which we can offer to the word and its peoples.

Faith helps to hold the contradictions of life in balance and is something we come to gradually. I love the words of St Anselm of Canterbury back in the 12th century - he said “Faith leads to understanding, rather than understanding to faith - it is that way round.”

Well – in these great, shining weeks of Eastertide, it is always good to pause, and think about what defines you as a Christian.

I’ll have been ordained 25 years next year, and in all that time it comes to me clearer and clearer that it’s our life of *prayer and worship* which must inform/undergird everything.

And specifically in Eastertide, whatever our different views about politics, economics, theological or church questions, what we celebrate and hold in common is that Jesus the 'Good Shepherd' knows us intimately, and 'calls us by name' (we heard in the gospel reading) into an intimate relationship with him: calls us by name so that we may know

- The Father's love *for you and me*;
- The saving power of Christ's passion, death and resurrection *for you and for me*;
- The promise of life now and life beyond life *for you and for me*.

"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

It's good today to have with us Dr Julian Litten, chair of our Cathedral Fabric Advisory Committee, and FAC members – thank you for worshipping with us this morning – and thank you for the expertise and wisdom, the advice and ideas which you bring – the lens that you help us look through as we care for and maintain and improve our glorious cathedral building, the mother church of this county of Suffolk. Don't you think that we have particularly beautiful scaffolding here in these parts.

This building, which we know and love and care for and raise funds for – and I think in gratitude especially of the members of our *Friends of the Cathedral* (celebrating 75 years this year) who make possible so many projects, not least most recently the west end furnishings, and also now our Foundation of St Edmund –

This building though is principally a house of prayer – it's the place where we come to meet with the living Jesus who calls us by name and says

"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

Although as Christians we know that God is present everywhere in his creation, and we can pray anywhere, nevertheless we also know that people experience a special awareness of God's presence in particular places. Some places do seem to be able to bring us closer to God, don't they. As we think of this holy space, could it be that the prayers of our predecessors have soaked into the stones which subsequently exude for our benefit? I often wonder. Is that just fanciful? I don't think so: I still vividly recall walking with Janet into the church which subsequently became my first living 20 years ago – and felt distinctly what a prayed-in place it was.

And those of us who are privileged to worship and work and care for and fundraise in these places over many years become very much aware that something of them rubs off. Somehow holiness does seem to cling to what has been touched by prayer. And we know that buildings such as this glorious one are indeed holy places.

How vital it is that we guard the sense of atmosphere of holy places such as this. To maintain this spiritual space where young and old, through all of life's changes from birth to death, can find themselves – and be found by the living Jesus who calls us by name.

I'm absolutely certain that if an alien from out there came in, they would get far more from the prayerful atmosphere of the building and its music, than ever they would from any words or sermons they might hear within it.

Atmosphere is a curiously elusive thing isn't it – it can be like a tender plant that's all too easily smothered by carelessness or thoughtlessness. So give thanks for the checks and balances operated by bodies such as English Heritage or our FAC (or for churches the Diocesan Advisory Committee) – however frustrating that can feel. It is a good thing to have that external reference to protect the very atmosphere of our holy places. If you think about it, every year millions of pounds are spent in peoples' efforts to create the *right atmosphere* in their homes, in restaurants, pubs, shopping malls, places of entertainment. We must lavish the same – and better – level of care and effort in our church buildings.

Of course some will argue that we don't need our buildings. That maintenance and fundraising for them is a distraction from the important things of faith. And we understand what they're saying – yes, of course Christianity is concerned with people rather than buildings.

Yet we know too that we can't do without buildings. Christianity is a religion of the incarnation – it has to be

concerned with the outward and visible. These great buildings are “the visible expression of our invisible delight: the outward sign of that for which we inwardly yearn.”

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So our great buildings – they speak to something very deep in my – in our – shared humanity. They express something of that for which humanity yearns. That's why we need to take them very seriously. That's why I've been privileged to spend so many years – both as a chartered surveyor before my ordination, and in the years since – ministering with them. I believe that these places can be gateways to heaven for us. We must allow them to proclaim the *infinite* in a *finite* world, to express the *other* in the *here and now*. To point people to a *reality* beyond themselves. So this cathedral – and a countless host of other churches – are jewels of infinite worth, not merely in our nation's crown of architectural heritage – but even more in our treasure of Christian spiritual experience as well. They externalise and articulate in stone and wood, metal and glass, that real presence in our communities of our Lord Jesus – the shepherd and guardian of our souls, the one who knows us by name and says

“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

Philip Banks, Eastertide 2017
