Sunday 25 September

1 Tim 6:6-19. Life that really is life

So here’s another story which Jesus told: a rich farmer had a bumper harvest, and so he made a plan, he dreamed a dream: ‘I will do this’ he said ‘I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ He wanted to “live the life.” But, just as in the story of the rich man and Lazarus, in his rush to store up the good times, he hadn’t planned on his own life being taken away.

This morning we are going to look at the difference between those who store up all kinds of riches in order to “live the life”, and those who give riches away, including spiritual riches, and take hold of “the life that really is life”: a comparison which Paul makes in today’s reading from his letter to Timothy.

Firstly in v.9-10, Paul describes the destructive cycle of desire, and shows that it’s a passive process – those who want to get rich ‘fall’ into the trap of temptation which awakens many more ‘foolish and harmful desires’ that ‘plunge’ them into destruction. He says those who follow the path of their own human desires, which have no foundation, fall and find themselves enmeshed within these desires, more and more, until suffocated by them. Something which starts so passively, a
path taken without even realising it, leads to downfall. As v.10 says “some people, eager to be rich, have wandered from the faith, and pierced themselves with many griefs.”

We know this from our own experience today. Many people aspire to “live the life” – to gain a certain level of wealth or achievement to enable them to kick back and enjoy life. Media and politicians encourage us constantly to aspire to greater things: whether that be riches or status or power or fame. Society as a whole appears to be hooked in to the belief that aspiration and endless growth are the way to go. Yet, of course, people are discovering that this desire to better yourself, rather than leading to contentment, fuels the fire of more discontent, leading to more desires, dreams, aspirations, that can never possibly be fulfilled. People are becoming disillusioned and depressed – they know that there must be more. A real spiritual hunger is emerging.

But there is good news. Secondly, in v.11-16, Paul lifts Timothy’s eyes to see true life, the life which is only available from the One who gives life – God alone – “God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To him be honour and might forever. Amen.” (v.15-16) It is God alone who gives “the life that really is life” and this life is full of its own kind of riches. It is full of blessings; the blessing of knowing that our past is forgiven and we can live freely and joyfully in the present, in the presence of God; the blessing of the peace which passes all understanding, deep within our hearts; the blessing of His perfect love which holds us and keeps us and drives out fear and hatred; the blessing of the Spirit of God living within us which creates in us love and joy and peace and many more blessings. God “richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment”.

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But just as the road to destruction is stumbled upon passively, so going the way of true life requires action – it takes effort to swim against the tide. In v.11-12 Paul tells Timothy to flee from the path to destruction; to pursue the virtues; fight the good fight; take hold of eternal life. A godly awareness is needed to walk the path of true life which has a foundation: the one and only God who gives life to everything. As Jesus said: “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.” (Matt 7:13). Those whose hope is in God, not in riches or other false securities, will find the “life that really is life”, full of the riches of God’s blessing, and lived both now and eternally in and with the everlasting God. Praise God from whom all blessings flow!

So there is a challenge here for us. Paul was writing to Timothy, a leader of the church, who followed Jesus as the way and the truth and the life, yet Paul still needed to tell him to flee from the aspirations that pull you down, and to pursue godliness, to take hold of eternal life. Each one of us needs to hear Paul’s urgency here. What is there in my life that I so easily follow to my own destruction? Am I unconsciously doing things to gain a reputation, status, power, or a certain level of wealth or achievement that will enable me to “live the life”? What is God calling me to let go of, so that I can take hold of eternal life?

But there’s a further challenge for us. Because, thirdly, in v.17-19, Paul tells Timothy to command others to “take hold of the life that really is life”. This is part of pursuing godliness. A godly person is so grounded in the sure and true foundation of God that they take on the character of God. And just as God is the giver of life, so also / those who become godly / will become life-giving. In receiving true life, they will not seek to store it up for themselves but to freely share it so that others too may richly receive God’s blessings, and God’s true life.
So Paul was telling Timothy to look beyond himself, and to engage in the fight to turn around those who are on the path to destruction, and set them on the path to life.

And here’s the challenge to this community in this place. Will you hold on to the blessings of the life which God alone gives, or will you share them with those who are disillusioned with trying to “live the life” and are hungering for true life? These spiritual seekers are unlikely to come to church because most people in this country today have never had any real contact with the church. They do not know that there is a faith here which people live by and so it does not even occur to them to come. BUT they are coming in to Michaelhouse during the week. And just as Paul charged Timothy to help others take hold of life, so I believe that God is asking this community of Great St Mary’s to help the hungry people of central Cambridge to find the way, the truth, and the life.

 Shortly after the Paris attacks last November, many visitors to Michaelhouse were coming in and wanting to write a prayer, wanting to believe that there is a God who is in control – that this world is not just careering around from one disaster to the next. By encouraging people to write those prayers, talking with them about their hopes and fears, and sharing our belief in the God of peace who hears and answers our prayers, we hold out the word of life. / During Lent, many children, naturally curious about footsteps leading to the altar and the installation there, came and engaged with the questions of life and faith prompted by the installation. And by this curiosity they encouraged their parents and carers also to engage. A Childrens’ corner is now being created in the Chancel, with toys, books, and a comfortable place to sit, to rest, and to take time to play and to pray. Children are open to thinking about life, and new parents are often re-evaluating it. By creating a space for parents and children to come and explore faith together, we hold out the word of life. / Through May and June, visitors of
all ages and backgrounds came and spent time reflecting and praying at the various prayer stations giving the message of life through different media. Through that time at least one person that we know of found new life in Christ. / Tourists come in looking for history and culture and beauty. The alternative guide to Michaelhouse enables them to see the beauty of God and the history of the Son of God who came and lived and died for us and who lives now and forever, bringing life. / Visitors are endlessly curious about the existence of a church inside a café, and that services continue even while the café is open. By our witness that this is a living church, where people today gather to worship the living God, we hold out the word of life. / Those educated and time-rich people who enjoy the coffee culture in the café have been invited to join a book group. Through giving the time and space to chew over the deeper questions, we hold out the word of life. / Those who are wounded by life, who are sick in mind or body, who are grieving, who are hungering with that deep spiritual hunger for truth and for true life, find themselves hovering on that threshold, looking in – it’s as if they know instinctively where the answer lies, but are held back, sadly, by the feeling that church is not for them. By encouraging them to come in, by listening to them, lovingly and openly, and by sharing with them the blessings that God alone can give, we hold out the word of life.

There are many more stories which I could share with you about Michaelhouse, which bear witness to the fact that God is always calling and drawing people to himself, because he loves us and he wants us to be set on the path to life. The challenge to each one of us individually is to let go of those things that we hold on to, to take hold of eternal life; and to share the blessings of that life with others. And the challenge to this community is look beyond yourselves, and, in your efforts to share God’s life with others, realise the gift that God has given you in Michaelhouse. Like Jeremiah, and unlike the rich man, listen to the word
of God and use what He has given you as a message of hope and of life. You have a unique opportunity to point people to the giver of life. To free people from the need to store up the good times to “live the life”, and help them to take hold of “the life that really is life.”

Paul says: “But godliness with contentment is great gain. Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.” Amen

Let’s pray: (silence)
Jesus said “I have come that they might have life, life in all its fullness”

The Spirit and the bride/the church say, “Come.”
And let everyone who hears say, “Come.”
And let everyone who is thirsty come.
Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.