

Eternal Life

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

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Seventh Sunday of Easter — 20 May 2012

Acts 1.15-17, 21-26, Psalm 1, 1 John 5.9-13, John 6.47-68.

It seems that every year one or other of my twin daughters, now aged 29, asks me two questions:

“Mum, do you *really* believe in God?”

And secondly, “Mum, do you *really* believe in life after death?”

I answer something like: “Yes, I believe in a spiritual reality or force, and my entry into this reality is through the Christian faith story. And I do believe there is life after death, but I don't really know what it will be like, and I don't worry about it. I simply try to live as good a life as I can in accord with Christian ethics.”

I got an early copy of our pew sheet and I've found a better answer for the next time they ask. It's from the Benedictine sister and former prioress, Joan Chittister, which Sarah Gowty sent us:

“The truth is that at its roots all religion speaks of the Mystery of Life that seeded all of us into life, that holds the cosmos in Being, that is the ultimate End of all our hope. It is the Unity for which we seek, the Oneness of Life that has many faces and speaks in many tongues.”

With an answer like that perhaps they won't ask me again for at least five years!

So what is there for us to consider in our readings today? What about eternal life?

The first letter of John invites each one of us to wonder about what eternal life is:

“And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.” 1John 5:11-13

What does our Christian faith story tell us about this eternal life?

Eternal life is a gift from God, which is given to those who believe in Jesus Christ.

We experience this eternal life in three different stages or periods of time and reality.

First, **eternal life** can be experienced by faith, in this world, now, while we are alive.

Secondly, **eternal life** applies to the time immediately after we die, when our souls are somehow separated from our bodies and we hopefully hear the words, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of the Lord”, as we enter into heaven to be with God and those we have known and loved.

Thirdly, **eternal life** is experienced after the great second coming of Christ and the end of this world and the beginning of a new heaven and a new earth.

Since reflecting on these words I have come to see that quite unconsciously my understanding of eternal life has been focused on the future after death — it has been limited to everlasting life, heaven, eternity. I had not given sufficient attention to the words that squarely place eternal life in the present, in the here and now.

This explains why over twenty years ago, when I was a lay reader, or liturgical assistant as they are now called, I asked the question, ‘What does it mean to say, ‘The blood of Christ, keep you in eternal life’, when giving the cup to someone?’

I got an answer that didn’t satisfy me and up till now it has puzzled me. Now as a result of wrestling with this text, and further study, I understand why the words are used.

So remembering always that our faith positions can change over time as we live and experience life more, we study more, we grow in faith, in the short time available in this service I invite you to reflect with me on a very confronting and difficult passage in John’s gospel. The words may be a collation of Christ’s teaching, but even so they are very early words of the Church, and as such are truly part of our faith story.

In the Gospel of John chapter 6 Jesus calls himself the bread of life and goes on to say, “*Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life.*” v. 47.

When quite reasonably there are objections, John has Jesus continue:

“Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.

“When many of his disciples heard it, they said, ‘This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?’ But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, ‘Does this offend you? ... The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.

“Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, ‘Do you also wish to go away?’ Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.’ ”

Such a human, even helpless response!

Each one of us now is invited to make our own response. Do we continue to follow or turn back? How do we understand this teaching? Scholars suggest that it is to be understood to refer to the bread and wine of the early Christian church practice of the Eucharist, and to Jesus’ death and resurrection.

I leave it with you, and close with simpler words that are said at our baptism, words said in the presence of children, babies, and families. In the Anglican tradition after the baptism with water, the priest makes the sign of a cross on our forehead and says:

Live as a disciple of Christ: fight the good fight, finish the race, keep the faith.

And those present say:

Confess Christ crucified, proclaim his resurrection, look for his coming in glory.

That’s all we have to do. We don’t have to explain, or justify, or prove our faith. Nobody can. All we have to do is live it, tell it, and keep it. And when we do, we are given—we have—eternal life, now, at this moment, and forever. Amen.