

FR JUSTIN FORD, HOMILY, 4<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY OF EASTER, 3<sup>RD</sup> MAY 2020

I'm not sure how it is these days, but when I was in the seminary, before we were ordained we had to complete our theological studies by writing what was called our 'Synthesis' – a 25,000 word summary of our understanding of the whole of our faith, the whole of theology. And you'd choose some central guiding theme, and relate everything in the Synthesis to that theme.

So I considered a few possible themes that would unify everything. I thought of the famous words of the first letter of St John, 'God is love'. Another possibility that ties everything together is the Incarnation, God becoming man: 'The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.' There's no one perfect answer – because in the end, you can't really reduce Christian Faith to just one sentence. But anyway, what I chose in the end as the guiding theme of my Synthesis was the final words of Jesus from today's Gospel, 'I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.'

Because God has placed in the human heart the desire for life, the thirst for life. The fullness of life. Physical life, certainly. That's the starting point. But then, the life of the spirit, and its desires. The desire for what are called the transcendentals, truth, and goodness, and beauty. In the end, the desire for *eternal* life. Really, the desire for God. Because we say about God, yes, that he's the *living* God. But more than this: God *is* Life, *infinite* life. Pope John Paul, in his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, 'The Gospel of Life', quotes an ancient Christian writer speaking about God: 'It is too little to say that this Life is alive: it is the Principle of life, the Cause and sole Wellspring of life. Every living thing must contemplate it and give it praise: it is Life [life with a capital L], which overflows with life.'

Another ancient writer, St Irenaeus back in the second century, wrote that 'the glory of God is man fully alive; moreover, man's life is the vision of God.' So, that's the life that we're all created for: to have our entire selves flooded with this infinite Life, for all eternity. And then, Jesus *is* this Eternal Life, come to meet us. We read near the start of John's Gospel, 'In him was life, and the life was the light of men.' Because the claim of Jesus is that he is the one who brings us that life. So he prays at the Last Supper, 'Father...this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.'

And, Jesus insists that he's the *only* one who brings that life to humanity, 'I am the way, the truth, and the *life*. No one can come to the Father except through me.' We hear something similar in today's Gospel. 'I am the gate of the sheepfold. All others who have come are thieves and brigands. I am the gate.' Because only in Jesus are full divinity and full humanity united in one person. So if others help *lead* us to him, that's good. But if we set others up as his *equals* or his *rivals*, as ultimate teachers alongside him, then, they're thieves and brigands. In the end, we have to come to him. And we know his famous words before he raises Lazarus from the dead: 'I am the resurrection and the life. If anyone believes in me, even though he dies he will live.'

So: 'I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.' Now, you'd think, it all sounds so attractive – if we put it like that, why doesn't everyone accept it? But here's the objection, what seems like the hurdle: Christianity, yes, it promises us *eternal* life – but it seems to keep us from having the fullness of life in *this* world. And so we have all these prohibitions, 'Don't do this, don't do that'.

But that brings us to the great mystery at the heart of the universe: we truly live, by *giving away* our life. That's even at the heart of God himself, the life of the Holy Trinity, the Three Persons giving themselves to each other eternally. So when God the Son comes into our world, it's to give away his life. He brings us eternal life by giving his *own* life away, planting it as a seed. 'Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains a single grain. But if it dies, it bears much fruit.'

And that's challenging. That's part of why the life-giving message of Christian faith isn't instantly accepted. In order to truly live, we need to die to ourselves, to our life of self-seeking. We don't want to give our lives to others. We don't want to have to restrain our own impulses. But unless we do that, we remain enclosed in ourselves, we don't truly live. We don't find our heart's *deepest* desire.

Jesus *does* promise life to the full even now, even in this world, insofar as that's possible – and then in infinite fullness in eternity. Because living life to the full isn't what we might imagine, getting as much power and money and pleasure as possible. Like Jesus we also live life to the full, we reflect the Holy Trinity, by living our lives as a saving gift to others. And that's what plants the *seed* of eternal life: by truly living life to the full even now.

And any prohibitions, they're about not falling for counterfeits, things that look like life, but in reality are death. When God gives the law to the Israelites in the Old Testament, he says, 'I have set before you life and death. Choose life, therefore, so that you and your descendants may live.' The teaching of Jesus is always about choosing genuine life, not the fake version.

It's not something we can do by our own power. We can only do it by drawing on the one who is life. We draw on his life-giving death and resurrection, through the gift of the Holy Spirit. Above all, we do it through receiving the *Bread* of Life, Jesus in the Holy Eucharist, giving his flesh for the life of the world. Anyone who eats this Bread, he promises us, will live for ever. Here we have the fullness of life – that we receive, in these difficult days, through our burning *desire* to receive, in our Spiritual Communion. And God willing, that we'll all soon be able to receive again in actuality. So that we may have life to the full, now and for all eternity.