

Archbishop Justin's sermon given at the Diocesan Celebration Eucharist at Gloucester Cathedral on Sunday 27 May 2024

I want to take one sentence out of that extraordinary reading of the words of Jesus and it's one that is deeply familiar to you, because it is part of the mission statement of the Diocese. I come, said Jesus, that they may have life and have it abundantly.

I take a broad view much of the time, that since at least 1989-91 and the fall of the Berlin Wall has been the searching of our societies in the Global north, in the economically lavish areas, of finding ways to give ourselves abundant life. I'm constantly struck by the enormous change since I was a child. That sense that people routinely go on holidays abroad, that sense that there is more and more machinery, that there is more and more change in technology and the ways we seek abundant life.

But in 2008 - 2010, a storm raged through the economy and in the years that followed, that storm sprang up again in other parts of our lives and our societies. Sporadically, but with increasing fury. The great recession, the collapse of the banking system, and the financial markets, knocked down an idol. An idol that we have worshipped – the security of our finances. *Oh, surely we could never be like we were in the 30s*, we said. Oh yes, we could.

The years of hardship that followed in many places meant that across this country, in this diocese, food banks sprang up, as particularly churches - but other places also - sought to meet the needs of those who for the first time in living memory, could not make ends meet. The second idol fell, that sense of autonomy, that we can each look out for ourselves.

In 2020, COVID struck, ripped through our society. At the time, we did everything we could. We cared for one another, we loved one another, actually we did as well as could be expected. We didn't know how to deal with it. I went into my local hospital as a volunteer chaplain in intensive care. And the first evening I was in there, I think it was the Easter Sunday of 2020, I met the head of intensive care and we talked about the fear that stalked the corridors of that hospital, that this was an enemy we could not see, and how dark it was. A third icon fell, that of the normality of being able to control disease.

And then on 24 February 2022, the all-out invasion of Ukraine struck. I've been there twice – once at the end of 2022 and again in February. And suddenly, with that came the cost-of-living crisis and the profound feeling that we could not look after ourselves. And today the Church reaches out to the hungry with 8,000 food banks, to children who can no longer have breakfast because even when their families give up a day of eating a week, there still isn't enough money. And we seek to do every single thing we can as a Church. We have risen to the challenge by the grace of God. Never mind that we are older than we were, never mind that we are less numerous than we were. 8,000 food banks in which the Church of England participates in partnership with others, 35,000 social projects. I've been looking at some of those in this diocese. And they express in a holistic way, in a way that says - when we look at someone, we don't just see a spiritual bit and a physical bit, we see the beauty of the whole person, created by God.

But with that war, the fourth idol fell. And that idol was that the days of peace in Europe were gone. And today, we sit here, and we know that that the risks of conflict are so much higher than they were. God willing, they will not happen and we pray that they will not

happen. But here in the Middle East, with that atrocious deadly war, our longing to see Palestinian and Israeli at peace, the longing to see Ukraine and Russia at peace, the longing to see the DRC and all where there are Anglicans are at peace. And where, day by day the reports come in on my phone from bishops and archbishops of agony and suffering. We long for peace and for peace in Europe. For we dread those days that we heard from our parents before. We do not want young men and women going to the battlefield. We do not want the destruction.

But the fourth idol has fallen, that we know what it takes to control conflict in our world. All these have fallen in these great storms. It's not to say that we're lost, it's simply to say that those things we put our trust in have proved not to be strong enough for the storms of life in our world.

And Jesus says – true. But I think that they may have life, and that they may have it abundantly. What does that mean? It means not that everything gets under control, he knew that. A few weeks ago, on Good Friday, we saw the extraordinary sight of God crucified, and suddenly everything control him. Nailed to a cross. Jesus does not say that abundant life means everything under control. Abundant life means the life of God that is within us in good times and bad, consistently. The life of God that is within us, persuading us that God is faithful. That in good times and bad times, God never lets go of us, that there is something elsewhere in John's gospel that can pull us out of his hand. And as Paul says in Romans 8, when he says neither angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor anything else in all creation can remove from us the love of God in Jesus Christ. And that is the message that Jesus sends us out to bring. That abundant life is not a successful life, a good life, a prosperous life, a stable life, a controlled life. Abundant life is God's life within us and as a community.

This morning, in an amazing service in a school hall, in the Forest of Dean, with over 300 people from three rural parishes, we heard testimony from a woman who had triplets and whose husband died a year. We heard how the community caught her up in the abundant life of it. Testimony of a couple getting married on Tuesday, one from Ukraine. Come here, in tragic circumstances, her husband lost, a son. And finding someone, and the church supporting them and caring for them in every possible way. And a new marriage, a new home, a new life. The abundant life of God. That is the message Christians have for the world. It's not about iconography, not saying put your trust in this idol, but put your trust in the God who we do not see, whose hand is more powerful than anything in this world, who holds us faithfully, who sees the best and worst of us, forgives because of the cross and gives us life through the resurrection and enables us to live that out through the giving of the Holy Spirit. That is the message that we are called to proclaim. And we're called to proclaim it in the simplest ways, by the holistic, loving care of those in it. In word and deed, as I've seen over the last three days in this diocese, the beauty of communities carrying those who for a while cannot carry themselves. Of communities reaching out and showing with confidence that God is faithful, for he is. I came that they have life and have it abundantly.

There will be so many pressures and problems here. In this place, this evening. Pressures of money, relationships, illness, concerns of one kind or another. But for everyone here, helped by those in their community, there is the gift of abundant life to be taken, hands held out to say yes to God's Lordship of our lives.

I grew up in a very mixed-up kind of family. My father was an alcoholic and died from it. And my mother divorced from him who was an alcoholic and went into recovery in my teens. It

was jolly confusing and jolly unpleasant. And becoming a Christian at 19 didn't make it any more so, or less. But the power of the life of God started the long clean-up job in me, which many of my friends and colleagues will tell you is still going on. And the years went by, my mother died last July 15, and the last thing I heard her say clearly was 'I shall see My Lord'. Even in those last moments of life, in a nursing home, with much in her life she regretted and much she celebrated, she found joy and peace because the life in her was greater than all the power of death.

Over this weekend, since Friday morning, we have been sharing that Good News and the abundant life of God. The idols of our age lie scattered and broken around us. The cross of Christ, the empty tomb, the flame of the Spirit lights up the night sky and says, 'Come to me and find abundant life'.

Amen.