

Sermon Theme: What's it all about? ... the meaning of life!

Sunday 1 June 2014 Worship, Milson Combined Church
Silvia Purdie

Prayer for the day

Jesus, we ask you again today, "What is most important? What gives life its true meaning?". Teach us now. Grow your life in us. Bring us to life that we might live to your glory. Amen.

Bible reading: Philippians 1:1-11

Gospel: Matthew 22:34-46

Children's Talk: Life is miraculous!

Mathematically, the fact that you work up this morning is an almost complete impossibility! The chances of our world existing in exactly the right way to allow for life – the grass outside, you, me, our cat & her fleas – the chances are so tiny as to be almost zero. Life is almost entirely impossible. Only almost, or we wouldn't be here.

There are countless things that God had to get right. Scientists like to talk about 6 key numbers that together form the basis of the whole universe, and if any of those numbers were just a bit bigger or smaller our world could never have happened and people would never have happened.

As [Stephen Hawking](#) has noted, "The laws of science, as we know them at present, contain many fundamental numbers, like the size of the electric charge of the electron and the ratio of the masses of the proton and the electron. ... The remarkable fact is that the values of these numbers seem to have been very finely adjusted to make possible the development of life."

I don't pretend for a minute to understand these numbers. They are impossibly tiny and impossibly huge both at the same time, but when they work together they create everything that we take for granted ... like the feeling of air. Can you please blow on your hand? Just because we can't see air doesn't mean it is nothing. It's made of lots of things, with just the right amount of space between them.

Feel the pressure of the air. Do you realize that if air was just a little bit more dense, the wind would flatten anything to the ground and we'd have no trees? And if air was just a tiny bit less dense there wouldn't be enough oxygen for animals or carbon dioxide for plants.

If earth was just a tiny bit closer to the sun all water would have evaporated & earth would be a dead rock, or if it was a little further away we'd be quite covered in ice.

All I say is that God knew what he was doing!

I have a challenge for the kids today ... to make the planet Earth, and stick all sorts of things onto it that we need for life, and different types of life ... we have stickers of animals & birds & fish & paper to make different types of places where living things live, and you might like to cut out pictures from the newspapers and draw your own pictures.

Life on earth is amazing. It is almost completely impossible, and we only have life at all because of the incredible work of our incredible God.

Quotes on The Meaning of Life

"I don't know the meaning of life. I don't know why we are here. I think life is full of anxieties and fears and tears. It has a lot of grief in it, and it can be very grim. And I do not want to be the one who tries to tell somebody else what life is all about. To me it's a complete mystery."

— *Charles M. Schulz, Charles M. Schulz: Conversations*

"Life has no meaning. Each of us has meaning and we bring it to life. It is a waste to be asking the question when you are the answer."

— *Joseph Campbell*

For me life is continuously being hungry. The meaning of life is not simply to exist, to survive, but to move ahead, to go up, to achieve, to conquer.

- *Arnold Schwarzenegger*

For the meaning of life differs from man to man, from day to day and from hour to hour. What matters, therefore, is not the meaning of life in general but rather the specific meaning of a person's life at a given moment.

- *Viktor E. Frankl*

The meaning of life. The wasted years of life. The poor choices of life. God answers the mess of life with one word: 'grace.'

- *Max Lucado*

Faith consists in being vitally concerned with that ultimate reality to which I give the symbolical name of God. Whoever reflects earnestly on the meaning of life is on the verge of an act of faith.

- *Paul Tillich*

"To be what we are, and to become what we are capable of becoming, is the only end of life." ~ *Robert Louis Stevenson*,

"Be glad of life because it gives you the chance to love and to work and to play and to look up at the stars." ~ *Henry Van Dyke*

"The sole meaning of life is to serve humanity." ~ *Leo Tolstoy*

"Lust living is not enough... one must have sunshine, freedom, and a little flower. ~ *Hans Christian Andersen*

"A life directed chiefly towards the fulfillment of personal desires sooner or later always leads to bitter disappointment." ~ *Albert Einstein*

"Everything that occurs in your life is part of God's plan to wake you up." ~ *Leonard Jacobson*

"Only when we are no longer afraid do we begin to live." ~ *Dorothy Thompson*

"We lose ourselves in the things we love. We find ourselves there, too." ~ *Kristin Martz*

"We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give." ~ *Winston Churchill*

"And this, our life, exempt from public haunt, finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, sermons in stones, and good in everything."
- *William Shakespeare*

"All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players: they have their exits and their entrances; and one man in his time plays many parts, his acts being seven ages."
- *William Shakespeare*

Westminster Catechism (1646)

Q. 1. What is the chief and highest end of man?

A. Man's chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy him forever.

Sermon

Macbeth, Act 5. Macbeth is holed up in his castle, shouting defiance on his enemies who besiege him, when they hear a woman scream ...

SEYTON MACBETH	Wherefore was that cry? The queen, my lord, is dead. <i>She should have died hereafter;</i> There would have been a time for such a word. To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow, Creeps in this petty pace from day to day To the last syllable of recorded time, And all our yesterdays have lighted fools The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle! Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player That struts and frets his hour upon the stage And then is heard no more: it is a tale Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, Signifying nothing.
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How do we answer Macbeth?

How do we answer a 16-year-old who is consumed with the darkness of the world and seeks only death? "Out, out, brief candle!"

How do we answer our own memories, the times when we ourselves felt life to be 'but a walking shadow'?

We begin our series on 'Have you ever wondered' with 'the ultimate question, The question'.

'Why are we here?' What is life for? specifically, What is my life for?

mostly this question is for most of us not that relevant. Most of us just get on with living and hope that the meaning of it will come out in the wash, will be picked out over our years, in patterns of letters and phonecalls, thanks for jobs done, in patterns of broccoli and roses, of scones baked and eaten, in patterns of touch and desire, in patterns of silence and song. Mostly life kind of makes sense.

It's when something happens, like Macbeth with his queen dead and the wood approaching his stronghold, that life fractures and we cut

ourselves on the broken edges. Loss. Death. Rejection. Failure. These cast the sharp light that can reveal our lives to be 'walking shadows'.

One response to this crisis of meaning is to legislate. Jesus was born into a culture that had a law for everything and for everything a law. So when the law-makers wanted to ask Jesus the Big Question, the Ultimate Question of life, the universe and everything, they put it this way:

³⁶ "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

Which was in itself a trick question because as we all well know, you can't pick and choose which laws to follow and which to ignore. Technically there is no such thing as the 'Greatest' commandment. If it is a commandment it is great, and no commandments are not, or they would not be commandments.

If you get stopped by a police cop he will not be the least interested in your opinions about whether the law requiring a maximum of 50 kms per hour in a residential area is any less important than the law requiring you to pay income tax. A law is a law is a law.

So the Pharisees are out to catch Jesus in a snare, inviting him to lay a noose for his own neck.

But Jesus does give them an answer. And it is an answer which in my opinion is the best answer anyone has ever given to the Ultimate question of life the universe and everything.

And his answer stuns the law-makers because it manages to both affirm all the law and teaching of their faith and subvert it all, both at the same time. Jesus makes two statements, bold and simple, a first commandment and a second commandment, which he describes as being like 2 coathangers on which all the law and the prophets hang. He is giving a framework.

So what are the 2 commandments?

1: Love God ... love wholeheartedly, love not duty, passion not law, relationship not outward appearance ... Love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and strength

2: The second is like it ... love others as yourself ... love wholeheartedly, love not duty, passion not law, relationship not outward appearance.

Work for you to do now ... I have some quotes by famous people on the meaning of life. Please have a read with the person next to you.

How do you respond to that idea about life? Does it ring true for you? Does it match up with Jesus' coathangers?

One more quote for you this morning ... the founding document of the Presbyterian church is the Westminster Confession, drawn up in a historic inter-church leaders meeting between the English (Anglicans) and the Scots (Presbyterians) in 1646.

The Catechism begins with the question:

Q. 1. *What is the chief and highest end of man?*

A. Man's chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy him forever.

Q. 1. *What is the chief end of man?*

A. Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.

It's the same question ... what are we here for? what is the meaning of our lives? But this answer always surprises me ...

A. Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.

The trouble is, we live soaked in a world that has a very different answer to the question 'What is the chief end of man?'

Many of you folk grew up in a time when our society's answer to that question was 'to be a good citizen, to be a good Christian, to do your bit for the greater good' ... or maybe 'to leave the world a better place'

My boys, however, are entering a world in which the answer to the question 'what is the chief end of man?' is ... to consume. to shop. to buy the latest phone and download the latest ad. People are becoming defined not so much by what they make or what they do but by what they buy. The 'chief and highest' end of human life is becoming far more about image than substance ... about how many friends you have on Facebook, about branding and style. ... it's about gaining as much 'glory' for ourselves as we can. 'He who dies with the most toys wins!'

Surely only serious religious nuts would say that the meaning and purpose of their lives was to give glory to God ... surely God has all the glory he needs in and of himself and doesn't need us to give him any of ours!

What ever does it mean, anyway, to glorify God?

There are a bunch of related words: worship, magnify, praise, thank, honour

and sure we gather here on Sunday mornings to honour Christ, his Father and Spirit and to celebrate our belonging in God together. Is that what it means to glorify God? Just an hour on a Sunday morning? But surely it is what we do in our every-days that expresses the meaning of our lives.

It's not my job to tell you what your life meaning and purpose might be, let alone what I think it should be. It is my job to tell you what matters to me, and to translate for you the ancient wisdom of scripture and other treasures of our faith, like the Westminster Confession, in the hope that just maybe something in what I tell you might just ring some bells for you and might just give you a coathanger on which to hang the bundle of convictions and priorities that make up your own precious unique God-given life.

So here's what I think ... I think that without God in it human life slides towards the petty, the hollow, and pointless. Macbeth was right – people are just brief candles, all too easily blown out, or like actors bursting onto the stage for their scene, making 'sound and fury, signifying nothing'.

Here's what I think ... I think that the more space we make for God in our lives the more real our lives become. As Jesus Christ is able to live within us, in our everyday normal living, so our lives ring with eternity in the here-and-now. A vibrant Christian faith will probably not make you rich or famous. It won't even make you happy all the time. It won't protect you from accidents or heartache. But it will give your life meaning. Substance. It will be a real life, well lived ... in the giving more than in the getting.

I think that giving glory to God is not about the words you say – you'll just irritate people going around saying "Praise the Lord" all day long! Giving glory to God is a habit of the heart and mind to turn towards the light, to surrender, to let go our grasping, to prise open our tight grip on our lives, our money, our time and energy and invite Jesus Christ to be Lord, over and over again.

Giving glory to God is summed up by Jesus in a nutshell in two halves ... Love God, and love others as you love yourself. Glory, Jesus-style, looks like love ... showing affection and kindness, going out of your way for someone else, deep care and connection, building others up in praise and gratitude ... and it is seamless, love poured into us from God when we least deserve it, love poured through us to others, love poured back

to us in the realness of friendship, marriage and family, love poured back to God in worship.

That's my answer to Macbeth, for what its worth.