

SERMON: "LIFE'S GREAT GIFTS"

by Geoffrey R Usher

Sunday 29 November 2020

It is something of a shame that we do not have a regular pianist among our Fellowship, so that we could sing a much greater range of hymns, including some from the General Assembly's "Green Hymn Book", Hymns for Living.

One lovely hymn in this book is Number 249, titled "Life's Great Gifts". Let me begin by reading the whole hymn:

Life is the greatest gift of all
The riches on this earth;
Life and its creatures, great and small,
Of high and lowly birth;
So treasure it, and measure it
With deeds of shining worth.

We are of life, its shining gift,
The measure of all things,
Up from the dust our temples lift,
Our vision soars on wings;
For seed and root, for flower and fruit,
Our grateful spirit sings.

Love is the highest gift of life
Our glory and our good;
Kindred and friend, husband and wife,
It flows in golden flood;
So, hand in hand, from land to land,
Spread sister-brotherhood.

I think that it's a lovely hymn. It is adapted by Waldemar Hille, from a poem by William E Oliver. I have taken its title, "Life's Great Gifts", as the title for this sermon.

The first verse again:

Life is the greatest gift of all
The riches on this earth;
Life and its creatures, great and small,
Of high and lowly birth;
So treasure it, and measure it
With deeds of shining worth.

Life is a gift.

We have life - not because we made it, but because we received it. Life was given to us through other people:

through our parents, and their parents, and the countless generations of ancestors from whom we are descended

through all those who lived in ancient times

and through our friends, to whom we turn for companionship, with whom we share the beauty, the pleasures, the trials and the pain which life in all its richness brings to us.

Blood is thicker than water, but the bonds of true friendship go beyond those of family - they are different because they are voluntary.

We cannot choose our relatives: we get them as part of the package deal when we are born. But we can choose our friends. And - the ultimate compliment - others may choose us to be their friends.

The cynic declares: "A friend in need is a pest!"

But it is true that you get to know who your true friends are when you are troubled and they are there; when they love you in spite of your faults - not because they don't notice your faults, but because they see more than your faults. You get to know who your true friends are when you know that you can rely on them, and they can rely on you, without any sense of unwilling or grudging self-sacrifice, or any sense of duress or obligation.

Life is a gift, and we need to be constantly grateful for this wonderful gift of life. However long we live, we shall never be old enough to earn the gift; but all of us can hope that we may be wise enough to appreciate its value and to cherish it.

We will express that appreciation if in our daily living we

think truly
love faithfully
strive nobly

so that we may pass on the gift to others.

So treasure it and measure it
With deeds of shining worth.

Verse 2:

We are of life, its shining gift,
The measure of all things;
Up from the dust our temples lift,
Our vision soars on wings;
For seed and root, for flower and fruit,
Our grateful spirit sings.

So much of what we have and what we are is given to
us, beyond the gift of life itself. Sometimes we may
be a kind of agent, a catalyst, but we are not the
creative force itself; we are not the source.

Scratch a finger. We can apply a band-aid, but even
before we have applied it, the scratched finger
begins to heal of itself.

Till the soil. Weed it, prepare it, water it,
fertilise it. However much you do, when you plant
the seed it is the seed which grows of itself. You
may help, but you cannot make it grow.

When we are able to acknowledge the wondrous mystery
in which these things have their foundation, then we
enter the realm of high religion; then "our vision
soars on wings" and "our grateful spirit sings."

Gratitude is the inward feeling of kindness received - the warm glow of the heart. Thankfulness is the natural impulse to express our feelings of gratitude. Thanksgiving is the following of that impulse, the manifestation of our feeling, the way in which we communicate - and share - with those around us so that they too may know the same blessings and the same feeling.

Verse 3:

Mind is the brightest gift of all,
Its thought no barrier mars;
Seeking creation's hidden plan,
Its quest surmounts all bars;
It reins the wind, it chains the storm,
It weighs the outmost stars.

We have been given the power to grow, to learn, to overcome difficulties, to bless the earth by our presence. But there is still much to be done.

We need to acknowledge that we have sometimes resisted growing up.

We need to admit failures and limitations.

We need to acknowledge that sometimes we resist the call of duty, we reject wisdom, we surrender to

temptations, we give way in the face of difficulties.

We need to lift ourselves above the petty and the mean, the selfish and the timid, the short-sighted

The 20th century American Unitarian Universalist minister Robert F Kaufmann wrote a piece called "Barriers":

From the beginning
People have faced barriers
Blocking progress.
Each of these barriers . . .
A flat earth . . .
A sound barrier . . .
Whatever its nature,
Has been found to exist
Only in the mind.
Each of these barriers
Has been changed to a
Limitless horizon
By people of vision . . .
People with restless minds,
Willing to dream,
To search,
To believe,
To try, and sometimes
to find.
Somewhere, within us,
Are the truths
That allow each person to improve,
And all people to achieve a higher goal
Than we have yet known.
We must allow no barrier
To stand in the way Of
that goal.

Verse 4:

Love is the highest gift of life,
Our glory and our good;
Kindred and friend, husband and wife,
It flows in golden flood;
So, hand in hand, from land to land,
Spread sister-brotherhood.

Love may be the "highest gift of life", but it has its existence in very ordinary, basic, day-to-day ways.

It is easy to get carried away with fine-sounding rhetoric

- about loving our neighbours as ourselves
- about international cooperation to supply the needs of the hungry, especially in the under-developed countries of the world
- about the widening gap between the rich and the poor nations
- about peace and love and joy and truth
- about enjoying the produce of the fields and gardens, and all the beauty, cheer and delight that civilised living can provide.

What does it mean? When the rhetoric has been stripped away, what are the challenges and the implications for us?