

What will you do?

Listen!

There is a real end of term feel to our service today. This is the last service before the summer holidays at which the choir will be singing. Just as schools tidying up after the academic year that is past, reminding students of what they have done and looking forward to what they will be doing in a new year and new classes, so we in church are doing something similar.

Today we bring together, in thanksgiving, at this service, the work we have been exploring as a congregation through this last year. Especially in our Advent and Lent courses on a Parish Communal Rule of Life and, a framework flowing from that, for each of us to develop a personal rule of life to support us in living out our faith day by day.

We are presenting it on the cover of our Sunday service booklet and we have made some changes to the service we use in this ordinary time...time in the church year outside big cycles of the Easter and Christmas festivals.

We did not want our "rule of life" to be wordy, but rather one that engaged our imaginations. Pictures on the front cover were chosen to indicate various aspects of our key values and concerns as a Church in response to Bishops Nicholas' call to all the churches of our diocese to be renewed in hope as we pray, serve and grow.

At both Advent and Lent courses we were inspired to think and to use our imaginations as we reflected on these images and on the poem "A Summer's Day" by the American Poet Mary Oliver.

Mary Oliver reflects on a summer day encounter with a grasshopper living its one wild and precious life.

The grasshopper instinctively knows to live its life to the full. It is making the most of the one wild and precious life it has been given. Its bended knees a representation of the prayer we offer God and its joy in leaping and living out its life a sign of how we can make the most of that one wild and precious life God has given us. The language of the poem is subtly ambiguous. Is Mary Oliver writing about the grasshopper or herself? As a community as Church and as individuals each of us is gifted and precious in God's sight. Each of us called to make the most of the life we have.

The idea of a Rule of Life is a tradition that stretches back in the Church to very early times but most clearly worked through in the famous Rule of St Benedict. Not so much a set of rules and regulations as a rhythm to life which enables us to make the most of our lives with a balance of rest and recreation, service and giving, study, worship and prayer. Making the best use of all the gifts God has given us.. the talents, expertise and experience we have gained in life, the material blessings we enjoy and most of all our very lives themselves..God's gift to us and to others all around us, our family, friends and neighbours.

It is impossible to be a Christian entirely on our own – in isolation from others – point of John Dunnes famous poem no man is an island unto himself.. ask not for whom the bell tolls. It tolls for thee.

We gather week by week as a church in this service of Holy Communion. Here, through the sacrament of Christ's body and blood we recognise our communion in Christ with God and with one another. And, in other ways, that sacramental reality of our common life is shared; In the greeting of one another in the sign of the peace or in the giving and receiving of tea and coffee, the conversations and interests we share before and after the service, the particular gifts and talents we bring to both worship in church and service in the wider community. In these ways we proclaim something of our shared life as well as our individual responsibilities.

Our Parish Rule of Life – summed up in the words in the centre of the images, then the eight themes - help us in living out our calling as a parish, our calling as members of God’s Church, as disciples of Jesus.

I expect that we have much more work to do in developing these themes as part of our common life. In the next year or so expect sermon series, study groups, and invitations to be part of groups helping to make this all happen.

“Listen!” Jesus begins the parable of the sower. Here is an echo of the great commandment Hear O Israel, (Listen!) the Lord our God is the only God and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and with all your mind and strength. He is calling them back to the very basics of the faith. Hear O Israel, listen to what your God is saying. That word listen is repeated several times in the course just one parable and its explanation.

At our recent diocesan clergy conference we were reminded that the crowd gathered in Jerusalem on the Feast of Pentecost heard the good news in their native languages. It is not so much that the apostles were speaking, but that the people Heard. They listened.

Our new order of service is designed to help us listen. There are silences at various points at which we can stop and listen to what God is saying to us. There are a number of options and choices at some of the key points in the service so that we have a variety from week to week and not become so over familiar with just one form that we rattle through it without recognising what we are saying.

We have deliberately chosen not to print out the Eucharistic Prayer in full. We have done this for two reasons: so that we can use more of the range of prayers provided by the Church rather than just the two we have printed previously and more importantly so that you can look and listen at this point in the service focussed on what is happening at the altar. We want to develop a real sense of gathering as a body around the altar - facing this altar as we affirm our faith in the words of the creed, bringing to this altar, our gifts of bread and wine and money – bringing the gift of our lives before God, to this altar. Here we are blessing and breaking bread, pouring and sharing wine – this

wonderful sacrament of Christ's body and blood. His risen life is tangible and visible in and through our lives lived in him.

Copyright laws prevented us from printing Mary Oliver's poem in our orders of service. (Or in this online copy of the sermon!) And I am glad because it means we now have a poem from local poet, Gail Foster, instead.

Drawing on the theme of what we will do with our one wild and precious life and with a real understanding of the life of this church over many years.

I invite you to embrace our parish rule and rhythm of life. I invite you to consider drawing up a personal rule of life. If you would like some guidance in that from any of the ministry team we would be very happy to assist.

I close by reading Gail's poem printed inside front cover of your service booklet.

Using Jesus' word of introduction "Listen!"

What Will You Do?

What will you do, the poet said, with this
One wild and precious life you have today
Within the womb the Baptist leaps for bliss
Upon the cross He gives his life away

What will we do indeed, for heaven's sake
We motley crew of children, priests, and fools
We offer fairy cakes and prayers, and break
Communal bread according to the rules

What did he do? He died, and rose again
Was unconventional, and wild, and brave
He gave his precious life that other men
Might rise in easy conscience from the grave

And you, sat there all cosy in your pew
What will you do with what he gave for you?

Prayer of Dedication.

Loving God you have called us to love you and our neighbour,
and to live our lives delighting in you and your good purposes for us.

Help us to shape the pattern of our daily living to make best use of the one
wild and precious life you have given us.

And may our worship here be both a joyful thanksgiving for all that you are and
all that you give us and an offering of our lives in your service.

For Jesus sake. Amen