

11th May 2025 – Easter 4

Rev'd Ally Barrett

Today marks the beginning of Christian Aid Week – you will see the envelopes in your pews, and you may have noticed the big display outside the South door (there is also a display in Michaelhouse, which you can look at over coffee after this service). Next Sunday afternoon we will be hosting a special service to mark Christian Aid's 80th anniversary, at which the preacher will be former archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams – I have no illusions about my ability to steal his thunder, so I hope you will allow me to reflect today at the start of Christian Aid Week on one of the charity's foundational principles and how it might provide a lens through which to read today's readings.

That principle is 'We believe in life before death'.

We do, of course, also believe in life after death, but it matters that we don't fixate only on what happens when we die or at the end of time, and forget that in John's Gospel, eternal life is a quality of life—a life that shares in the life of God. Eternal life, for John, is abundant, relational, and rooted in knowing God through Jesus Christ in the way that the branches grow from a vine. So eternal life is not only a future hope but a present reality that begins in relationship with God and shapes everything that we are, and everything that we do. To have eternal life is to live now in the light of God's love and justice.

Where John's Jesus talks of Eternal life, the other Gospels tend to use the language of the Kingdom of God. It's about God's reign breaking into the world—healing, justice, mercy, and renewal here and now, with a future consummation. John doesn't use "kingdom" language as often, but when he does, it usually overlaps with eternal life:

For example, Jesus tells Nicodemus in John chapter 3 that one must be "born from above" to see or enter the kingdom, and follows this immediately with teaching about eternal life as an outworking of God's love for the world.

Both express this profound truth that what God promises in Jesus Christ is available now – Jesus speaks about eternal life in the present tense because what he is talking about transforms the present as well as reaching into eternity.

I'm labouring this point a bit because how we understand eternal life matters. It matters because the offer of eternal life is a huge part of Christian hope – hope for this world, as well as hope in the world to come.

One could, I suppose, say that "Eternal life" in John's gospel is to the individual what "the kingdom" is to the world. But in the context of a Christian community we cannot

separate the life of the individual from the life of the community – and the world. This also matters.

That founding principle of Christian Aid, that we believe in life before death, is an acknowledgement that in some of the less honourable periods of Christian history, the idea of the promise of eternal life has been misused by those in positions of power. European Christian missionaries and enslavers often presented Christianity to enslaved people in a way that emphasized heavenly reward after death, while discouraging any expectation of justice, dignity, or liberation in this life.

Enslaved people were told to be patient in suffering, and look forward to the next life where they would be free.

The idea of eternal life was effectively weaponized to pacify resistance, promising spiritual freedom someday while justifying physical bondage now.

By delaying justice to the afterlife, enslavers denied the very heart of the Gospel, which is about God's kingdom coming on earth as it is in heaven, abundant life being offered here and now as well as in heaven.

In reclaiming the full meaning of eternal life—as a present, transforming reality as well as a future hope—we can recover the radical, liberating power of Jesus' message.

The Gospel is not an escape from the world but an invitation to be part of its transformation.

Jesus doesn't offer eternal life instead of liberation—he offers eternal life as liberation, now and forever.

The womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglas expresses this inseparable nature of eternal life and divine justice succinctly: “Eternal life is about the kind of world we are called to help bring into being.”

This may help us understand more about the raising of Tabitha.

She and her group of widows seem to be living in a way that reflects what Luke (who wrote the book of Acts) would call the kingdom of God, and what John might call eternal life, modelling the justice, healing, providence and love of God. When Tabitha is raised back to life (and back to her ministry of care) this is in the context of her already being someone who is living her eternal life, with her works, like Jesus' works, witnessing to the fact that she truly belongs to God.

Tabitha is already living her eternal life—her life in God—before Peter raises her. Her acts of charity, her service to the vulnerable, her presence in that community: all of these are

signs, or in John's terms 'witnesses' or 'testimony' that she is participating in the life of God, with a deep sense of belonging to the flock of the Good Shepherd.

And when Peter raises her, it's about restoring her bodily life so that her witness can continue. It's a sign, just like Jesus' signs in John's gospel (which is what John calls Jesus' miracles), pointing to the reality of God's power at work now, not just later.

The theme of Christian Aid's 80th anniversary is 'The unstoppable power of hope'. The hope we have in God can be about this life, this world, this time, precisely because we believe in God's ultimate sovereignty in all eternity. We can pray 'your kingdom come on earth' because of the eternal heavenly kingdom. We can work for God's justice here and now precisely because we believe in God's ultimate justice. We can work for the healing of this world here and now precisely because of our faith in God's ultimate purposes for the renewal of creation.

And we can't truly live our own eternal life of liberation if we are content to ignore the injustices in God's world that we could, or should, be working to transform.

We live in an era in which we are held between the now and the not yet of God's kingdom, the now and not yet of eternal life, and between the knowledge that God holds the world in his hands and nothing can snatch them away what God loves, and our equal knowledge that we also hold the world and its people in our hands, and that we have been entrusted in our stewardship of the world with nothing less than God's beloved creation, and beloved people.

And we hold together both our thanksgiving for the work of Christian Aid in building the kingdom and living out the eternal life we have been given, with the reality of the world's brokenness.

To believe in eternal life, is to believe in life before death, too, and to commit ourselves to playing our own part within the purposes of God in the outworking of God's life and love.

Amen.