Sermon

Scripture: John 10:1-18

Key Verse: ‘The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full’ (John 10:10).

Introduction

*You will need: A measuring jug, another jug containing water, 200ml cannister of shaving foam.*

* Invite a member of the congregation (perhaps a child/young person) to help. Start by asking the old riddle*: ‘What’s heavier: a ton of feathers or a ton of gold?’* (Answer: they weigh the same - a ton is a ton.) Ask the congregation if they think the same applies to the liquids.
* Ask the volunteer to measure out 200ml of water from the jug and show the congregation how far it comes up the jug. Pour the water back into the jug. Then point out that you have a 200ml canister of shaving foam. Ask the volunteer if they think 200ml of shaving foam will take up the same space as the water – shouldn’t 200ml of water be the same as 200ml of shaving foam? Then start emptying the shaving foam into the jug – and keep going until all 200ml is out of the canister … beware of the mess! This should create a vivid image of ‘abundance’ and ‘overflowing’.
* This is the kind of life that we’re reflecting on and celebrating on Covenant Sunday: the promise of Jesus for a life which is more than just simply living, but life ‘to the full’ – or as other translations put it, ‘life in abundance’, which is overflowing, abundant and bursting out into the world in surprising and exciting ways.
* At the heart of the teaching is a verse of Scripture which is probably familiar to many and which forms the basis of our territorial [vision statement](https://www.salvationist.org.uk/faith/our-vision-and-mission): the words of Jesus found in John’s Gospel which say, ‘I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full’ (John 10:10b). But what does that actually mean? What does this abundant, full life look like?

Context

* John 10:10 is a very familiar verse of Scripture and for good reason. Many commentators note how this verse can ‘summarise’ the whole of John’s Gospel and the whole of Jesus’ ministry and mission.[[1]](#footnote-2) The danger, however, is that occasionally such familiarity can breed contempt!
* On Covenant Sunday, we continue to explore our Christian identity as disciples through the lens of covenant. We remind ourselves that covenant is not just a contract or agreement, but at its deepest and richest it is saying, ‘All I have is given to you and all you have is given to me.’ The ultimate exchange happened when Christ took all that we are to the cross and gave us eternal life. In response, we are called to a rich, full, joyful life, overflowing under the favour and blessing of God and in continual fellowship with his people.
* In John 10:10 we see something of this covenant dynamic playing out. There’s a very clear promise from Jesus – *he* has come so that *we* may have life in all its fullness. We get even louder echoes of covenant, however, when we look at the passage as a whole, which is sometimes called ‘The Good Shepherd Discourse’ (John 10:1-18).
* These verses are crammed with allusions to Old Testament Covenant, found in Ezekiel 34. This prophetic oracle promises that one day God will give his people a good shepherd. In the way that Jesus draws on Ezekiel 34 in his speech in John 10 (some commentators count 23 similarities between Ezekiel 34 and John 10)[[2]](#footnote-3), Jesus is affirming that in him is the fulfilment of God’s covenant promises to his people.
* Relatedly, Jesus says that he has come that *they* might have life in all its fullness – it’s a promise that refers to the whole community of God’s people, not just an individual or select group.

Key Headings

1. **Abundant Love – The Motivation**
* Time and time again we see that love is the key driving force, the motivator, behind God’s promises and his covenants with his people. This is a key theme throughout John’s Gospel as a whole and it’s also evident in this passage of Scripture. We get a picture of the Good Shepherd as the One who is willing to lay down his life for his sheep (v11), the One who is completely and passionately devoted to his flock whatever external attacks may come at them (v12), the One who knows the sheep intimately from a place of deep relationship (v14). Quite simply, love is the reason that Jesus has come: ‘that they may have life to the full’.
* *Quote - ‘Jesus’ mission is that we might be swept into the relationship with God that he has had from all time, an eternal relationship of love.’[[3]](#footnote-4) (Francis Moloney)*
* A challenge with the word ‘love’, however, is that it can mean different things to different people. What kind of love are we talking about here? The Beatles may have been right when they said, ‘All you need is love’, but the love that we see in John 10, the motivator for Jesus’ mission and ministry, is quite specifically linked to Jesus’ ‘laying down’ (vv11,15,17,18) and ‘taking up’ (vv17-18) his life.
* Jesus’ death and resurrection are essential aspects of his love and his offer of abundant life. As Michael Gorman puts it, ‘Here and throughout the Gospel [of John], the life-giving mission of Jesus is not separated from his death and resurrection. Christian theology, and Christian mission, therefore, must always keep them together.’[[4]](#footnote-5)
* The offer of abundant life is founded in the covenant love of God, expressed in the death and resurrection of Jesus. It’s not simply love which means being vaguely nice or caring of others. It’s a love which is sacrificial, determined and powerful.
* Love is a word which people inside and outside The Salvation Army identify with, as it’s seen to be at the heart of what we’re all about, our motivator. Having the challenge of describing the Army in a context shaped by military dictatorships, Salvationists in the South America East Territory decided to use the strapline, ‘*Un Ejercito de Amor’* (An Army of Love).
* Similarly, when William Booth once wrote to Salvation Army soldiers telling them about what it means to ‘be proper Army’, he said: ‘The ruling passion of the true Salvationist is love.’[[5]](#footnote-6)
* Covenant Sunday also provides us with a time, however, to reflect on, lament about and repent of the times when we’ve failed to love God and others as we ought to have done.
* In 1930, a time when arguably The Salvation Army’s mission was beginning to stagnate, one of the Army’s early leaders, Samuel Logan Brengle, was asked if he was going to jump from the sinking ship now that the glory days were over. He says that questions about the future of the Army (and bearing in mind, this is in 1930!) are as old as the Army itself, but he does warn that the thing that will ultimately be the death of the Army is if love – specifically the love we see and experience through Christ – is no longer its motivator.
* Brengle warned:

*‘We must still prove our discipleship by our love one for the other. It is not enough to wear the uniform, to profess loyalty to Army leaders and principles, to give our goods to feed the poor and our bodies to be burned. We must love one another. We must make this the badge of our discipleship.*

*The Army is so thoroughly organised and disciplined, so wrought into the life of nations, so fortified with valuable properties, and on such a sound financial basis, that it is not likely to perish as an organisation, but it will become a spiritually dead thing if love leaks out. Love is the life of the Army. But if love leaks out we shall lose our crown, we shall have a name to live by and yet be dead.*

*We may still house the homeless, dole out food to the hungry, punctiliously perform our routine work, but the mighty ministry of the Spirit will no longer be our glory. Our musicians will play meticulously, our songsters will revel in the artistry of song that tickles the ear, but leaves the heart cold and hard.*

*Our officers will make broad their phylacteries and hob-nob with mayors and councilmen and be greeted in the marketplace, but God will not be among us. We shall still recruit our ranks and supply our training garrisons with cadets from among our own young people, but we shall cease to be saviours of the lost sheep that have no shepherd.*

*If the future of The Salvation Army is to still be glorious, we must heed the exhortation: 'Let brotherly love continue.' [[6]](#footnote-7)*

* Love is ultimately what motivates God in his offer of abundant life and, ultimately, it is love – expressed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus - that should motivate all of our expressions of abundant life too.
1. **Abundant Light – The Transformation**
* David Ford says that the opening of John 10 invites the reader to imagine a ‘nightmare scenario’ for shepherds and gatekeepers in the first-century Middle-East.[[7]](#footnote-8) The scene is the dark depths of night, and the gatekeeper and the sheep need to rely only on being able to hear the voice of the true shepherd, the good shepherd. This is contrasted with all kinds of imposter voices, such as thieves and bandits, who threaten the welfare and security of the sheep. According to Jesus in John 10 (vv1,8,10,12), there are many.
* What are some of the ‘voices in the darkness’ that threaten the safety and security of our own flock? Personally and corporately?
* It is, however, into this darkness comes the transformative and abundant life of the Good Shepherd, who defeats the darkness. Light and darkness are also big themes in John’s Gospel.
* *Quote – ‘The very notion of a life-giving mission suggests that there is a need for transformation, either from minimal to abundant life, or even from death to life. Paradoxically, it is Jesus’ death for the sheep (10:15) that is the source of such life. Death is undone by the means of death […] Jesus’ life-giving ministry can be considered a mission of reversing the death-dealing actions of evil shepherds.’ [[8]](#footnote-9) (Michael Gorman)*
* In considering the transformation of life that Jesus brings, it is also important to notice the contrast of this with the darkness of the ‘robbers’ and thieves. The Hawai’i Pidgin Bible Translation of John 10:10 puts this vividly when it says, ‘Da steala guy, he ony come fo steal, kill, an bus up da place. But I wen come so da peopo can come alive inside, an live to da max!’ [[9]](#footnote-10)
* These verses remind us that the abundant life offered by Christ pierces the darkness, and they stand in stark contrast to all that seeks to rob people of abundant living: those who are the victims of the abuse of power, those who have been mistreated, those who have experienced injustice.
* The promise of transformation from darkness to light is picked up in the echoes from Ezekiel 34, which we see Jesus alluding to extensively in John 10 when the ‘Good Shepherd’ comes:
* Being rescued and found
* Having good pasture and grazing
* Having injuries treated
* Being strengthened
* Tasting justice
* Being secure and at peace
* Having a plentiful crop and no longer being hungry
* Being liberated from slavery
* No longer being afraid
* Experiencing deliverance
* Being in intimate covenant relationship with God.
* In that sense, Ezekiel 34 gives us a vivid picture of all of the dimensions of what transformed ‘life to the full’ looks like. It is important not to separate this promise but to view it as a whole, noting that the promises don’t refer simply to material/mortal or spiritual/eternal things; instead the eschatological promise of abundant life is for the transformation of the whole of life – flowing from an intimate, restored, covenant relationship with God.
* *Quote - ‘Eternal life in John’s Gospel is much more than the goods of earthly, mortal life, but it is certainly not less than them. It surpasses them by including them, not leaving them behind. Eternal life is the healing and transfiguration of life in all the ways that mortal life falls short of life in all its fullness.’[[10]](#footnote-11) (Richard Bauckham)*
* Marianne Thompson echoes this when she says, ‘Abundant life looks back toward creation: it anticipates the blessings of the new life of the resurrection, especially the blessing of being in the divine presence; and it lies at the intersection of past and future, while in the present it offers communion with the living God.’[[11]](#footnote-12)
1. **Abundant Life – The Participation**
* Jesus has come so ‘that they might have life and have it to the full’*.* Life is something that is actively lived. While there is a ‘now-and-not-yet’ tension going on in John 10, the reality is that Jesus has come and offers us all life abundant today. Life is for living – and we’re called to experience the abundant life Jesus offers and, as part of our participation in that life, we’re called to share it with others (think back to the overflowing shaving foam jug!).
* The word ‘life’ (and its associated words) appears 56 times in John’s Gospel. Remarkably absent from John’s Gospel, however, is the word ‘Kingdom’ (which appears much more frequently in the synoptics). This has led some scholars to conclude that when John talks about ‘life’ he is talking about the same sorts of things the other Gospel writers are talking about when they talk about ‘the Kingdom’.[[12]](#footnote-13)
* Abundant life is not merely an abstract concept but is about actually living as the people of God ‘on earth as in heaven’. As Michael Gorman puts it, in John 10:10 ‘Jesus does not merely disclose something – he delivers something. That something is life – abundant and eternal’.[[13]](#footnote-14) It’s not enough to simply talk about ‘abundant life’ – it needs to be our experience.
* You could spend a significant amount of time describing your favourite piece of music played by your favourite band or your favourite film to someone else, but ultimately this wouldn’t convey the magnitude of the music or film. The power of the music or film can’t simply be learned by hearing about it – it needs to be experienced.

**Conclusion**

* This is both the initiation and the challenge for us on Covenant Sunday – have we as a church community experienced, or are we experiencing, the abundant, full life that Christ offers? Is that overflowing into our community?
* Are we committing to challenge the darkness, the ‘bandits and robbers’ that threaten to steal abundant living from others? Having encountered the life-giving love of Jesus, demonstrated in his death and resurrection, is that motivating our worship and mission, our fellowship and our service in the world?

**Questions for reflection**

* What does John 10:1-18 tell us about the nature of love?
* Read through Ezekiel 34. What picture does this paint of ‘life in all its fullness’? Are these material or spiritual things?
* The Hawai’i Pidgin Bible Translation of John 10:10 says, ‘Da steala guy, he ony come fo steal, kill, an bus up da place. But I wen come so da peopo can come alive inside, an live to da max!’ What do you think about the identity of ‘da steala guy’? What are the things that are stolen?
* Can you think of a time in your own life that was particularly difficult or where you felt that ‘abundant life’ was being stolen? Where could you see or experience God amidst that?
* How does ‘life in all its fullness’ affect the mission and ministry of your local corps?

**Bibliography and Suggested Commentaries**

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1. See, for example, David Ford, *The Gospel of John,* p.205 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Michael Gorman, *Abide and Go,* p.52 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Francis Moloney, *Love in the Gospel of John,* p56 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Michael Gorman, *Abide and Go,* p51 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. William Booth, ‘The Millenium’ (sic), p343 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Samuel Logan Brengle, *Ancient Prophets.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. David Ford, *The Gospel of John*, pp205-207 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Michael Gorman, *Abide and Go,* p52 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. https://www.bible.com/bible/76/JHN.10.HPB [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Richard Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory,* p71 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Marianne Thompson, *The Gospel of John,* p91 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Donald Carson, ‘The Message of John’s Gospel’ [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Michael Gorman, *Abide and Go,* p46 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)