Teaching Starter

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

* This Covenant Sunday we reflect on and celebrate together the promise of Jesus for a life that can be lived ‘to the full’ – or as other translations put it, ‘life in abundance’, which is overflowing 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 individually and corporately as a church community? And how can we celebrate it together?

Context

* John 10:10 is a very familiar verse of Scripture and for good reason. Many commentators note how John 10:10 can ‘summarise’ the whole of John’s Gospel and the whole of Jesus’ ministry and mission.[[1]](#footnote-2)
* As we 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, in love, 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. This in itself should motivate all of our expressions of abundant life too.
* 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 fulness. 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). 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.
* 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.
* John 10:1,5 also remind us that the abundant life offered by Christ pierces the darkness, and this stands 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.
* 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 - ‘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.’ (Marianne Thompson, The Gospel of John).*
* 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’.[[3]](#footnote-4)3
* 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.’[[4]](#footnote-5)4It’s not enough to simply talk about ‘abundant life’ – it needs to be our experience.
* This ‘abundant life’ isn’t something we keep to ourselves. It’s better experienced with others, as we seek to participate in and contribute to the world around us as Jesus’ disciples.
* As we think about ‘Celebrating Life Together’, Richard Foster writes that ‘Celebration is at the heart of the way of Christ.’[[5]](#footnote-6)5 When the poor receive the good news, when the captives are released, when the blind receive their sight, when the oppressed are liberated, how can we not celebrate together the fullness of life that is found in Jesus? (Luke 4:18,19 / John 10:10).
* Celebrating life together gives us the strength to faithfully keep walking in a covenanted relationship with Jesus each day, despite what may be happening within us and around us.

Reflection

* 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? How can we ‘celebrate life together’ in an effective and missional way?

1. See, for example, David Ford, *The Gospel of John,* p205 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Michael Gorman, *Abide and Go,* p52 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. 3 Donald Carson, ‘The Message of John’s Gospel’ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. 4 Michael Gorman, *Abide and Go,* p46 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. 5 Richard Foster, Celebration of Discipline [↑](#footnote-ref-6)