

## **Not life as we know it**

*John 10:7-18*

Life today as we know it is often not life as we would prefer it to be. There are many problems which beset us in this world, problems of social and political unrest and conflict, problems of moral and economic uncertainty, problems of many kinds and in many degrees, which press in on us and for which it is difficult to discern any solutions. We suffer hardship and illness, distress and dissatisfaction with respect to many aspects of daily living. It can get to the stage where we find the weight and urgency of these problems oppressive, all the more so because of their intransigence with respect to finding answers. Life as we know it is subject to the power of death and disintegration, and Christians are not immune to these problems.

How is it that such a situation has come to pass, and is there a solution? Can we find life in the midst of the death that surrounds us? Yes there is hope; hope that comes from the living God, the God who brought all things into being and gives life to his creatures. This God is the source of meaning for the creation, the one who holds all things together. It is in God that our lives come together once again. But why is it that we so seldom see any evidence of this life in our midst? Why are Christians not giving evidence in their lives of a new life, a life lived to the full, a life restored and renewed, a life not as we know it, but a life which bears all the hallmarks of divine life, a life energised and directed from outside our rapidly collapsing moral, political, economic and social systems? To answer this question we need to examine more closely why society is disintegrating around us, and what the solution is to this problem.

As a result of rejecting God as the source of meaning and direction for life, we have given ourselves over to alien spiritual forces which have come to control us. Competing spiritual forces pull society in different directions as a result of different features of human life, that is, aspects of the creation, being seen as the origin of meaning and as integrating points. The result is disintegration in society as we see now one, then another, of the different features of our world claimed to be the source of meaning and salvation. This applies whether it is economic growth, racial harmony, scientific progress, medical advances, or political change. None of these things are

able to provide true direction and meaning to life, since they are not the source of our life but parts of it, and as such are dependent on the source along with every other part. To see one or more of these parts as the origin of and source of meaning for any or all of the other parts is to consider that some creatures are dependent on other creatures for their existence rather than on God the Creator and sustainer of all that exists. This is idolatry, treating creatures as though they were independent and self-sufficient; the worship of false gods to which we give our allegiance.

It is God alone who transcends all the different aspects of human life, God alone who provides meaning, since all things have their origin in God, and thus all equally depend on him for their existence. God alone is the source of life for the creation.

But we sinners have turned away from God, the source of life, and have sought instead to find meaning and direction in the things that God has made. We have brought disintegration into our lives as we seek after many false gods, turning from one thing to another in a desperate attempt to find in them the meaning and integration we lack. The result of this is death and destruction, as we frantically seek to fix the problems we have created by seeking new meaning and direction everywhere, anywhere, just so long as it is not sought in God.

Christians, unfortunately, are not immune to this desperate seeking after meaning in the things which God has made, and not in God himself. We live compartmentalised lives, fragmented lives, lives which have a seismic fault line running through them, a fault line which at any moment can convulse and tear apart the fragile fabric of the lives we have constructed for ourselves. That fault line is the idea that life can be divided into two compartments. On the one hand we have our spiritual life, our worship of God, our fellowship together, our participation in evangelism, all the various activities we are involved in as Christians. On the other hand, we have our secular life. Our work, our education, our political opinions, our artistic tastes, our music and media, our entertainment and our economic transactions, all these are considered separate from and independent of our relationship to God. Here we do not seek for direction and meaning from the creator and sustainer of all that exists; we seek it from within the world he has made. We turn to the unbelievers, the secularists, those who do not acknowledge God, and we seek their advice as to how we should live.

Our spiritual life is considered to be merely a part of life, separate from and independent of the rest of our existence, which is considered to be "secular," that is, something in which God has no interest and no concern. Admittedly we do sometimes give heed to moral or ethical issues in other parts of our life, but not always even this manages to intrude into the closed world of the "non-spiritual" side of life.

But this fault line, this seismic timebomb waiting to go off, is not in the slightest bit Christian. It is a species of idolatry, since it is rooted in the idea that there are other sources of meaning, other integrating points, other ways to live which have nothing to do with God whatsoever. We do not turn to God for direction in our education or our politics, our economics or our science or medicine: we turn to other sources to find meaning, and we seek in these things themselves the cure for our problems. But how can politics solve the problems of Syria, of Gaza, of Somalia, of South Sudan, to mention but a few of the worst trouble spots, let alone New Zealand? The search for meaning through politics is the **problem!** How can economic solutions cure the unemployment, the welfare burden, the indebtedness of New Zealand? The search for meaning in economics is the **problem!** How can we find solutions for racial conflicts in the United States, in Fiji, in Otago and Invercargill, by emphasising racial and ethnic origins? The search for meaning in ethnic identity is the **problem!** All these things lead to disintegration and destruction in human life because we seek in them the source of meaning, the integrating power which can put our lives back together again. By treating them as the source of meaning and power we have committed idolatry, and through this service of false gods we have cut ourselves off from the true God, the only living God, the only God who can grant to us the life which we so desperately seek.

If we recognise that God alone is the source of life and meaning for the creation, if we turn to God in repentance and faith and seek his direction for our lives, then we will start to find answers. For then we will find that the meaning of life, the source of our existence and that of the whole of creation, is found concentrated in Christ. God has revealed himself in Christ as the origin and source of all that exists, and its true meaning can only be found in reference to Christ. And it is in reference to Christ that all things find their true relationship with one another, since then everything will find its proper place in God's creation, and none of them will be elevated to pretend to be

the meaning of other things, nor will they be depreciated as unworthy of our interest and involvement.

Once we find the source of meaning in God, who has revealed himself in Christ and given us the Scriptures to guide us truly to himself, then life will come together and we will find wholeness and integration. Then we will recognise that all things are subject to Christ, and there is nothing outside of the Lordship which has been granted to him. Once we find our meaning in Christ, all things come together in harmony.

Thus we find that there are not two compartments to life, there is no fragmentation between our faith and our politics, our education, our economic life, our appreciation for art and architecture, our work and our leisure. Our faith is then not something separate from all these things, something which has only an external relationship to them. Faith becomes the internal, integral bond which unites all the areas of our life into one, as our faith in the one God then flows through every area of life without exception, and we can live out our lives as Christians in everything that we do. We can then bring hope to a world fragmented by competing and conflicting idolatrous claims to be the source of meaning, since our own lives will demonstrate that all things do indeed come together in Christ. Once we start to demonstrate that Christ does indeed give us an alternative to the death and disintegration that the world offers us, through showing an alternative way to live, an alternative path for political and economic life, an alternative way of education, and new and different approach to the arts and the media, a family life that hangs together rather than falls apart, then we will be able to say to the world, we have found life in Christ. But as long as we maintain the fraud and the fiction that we can separate life into compartments, the "spiritual" and the "secular," then we can have nothing to offer the world, for we will be as impotent as the unbeliever in resolving the problems the world faces. For we will be as dependent as the unbeliever on idolatrous viewpoints, namely that the source of meaning and direction for the so-called "secular" areas of life comes from a source other than God.

The idea that life can be separated into the "spiritual" and the "secular" is one of the lies of the idols which are so influential in our society. It is the principal lie, the big lie, the source of so many other lies that destroy and kill. It originates from the father of lies himself, who has always sought to pull us away from whole-hearted obedience

to God, that is, obedience which comes from a heart made whole - united to love God. If we love and serve God with our whole heart, then there is no place for alien gods to capture our allegiance, no room for other loyalties, no substitute for the living God in our lives.

What does it mean to say something is "secular"? Simply that God has no concern, no interest, no legitimate authority over it. It is something cut off from God, subject instead to other powers, other gods, other authorities who give meaning and direction to it. Thus to acquiesce in the idea that life can be compartmentalised into the spiritual and the secular is to admit the legitimacy of other gods, that is, to commit spiritual adultery, idolatry. There is no God but the living God, there is no authority save that which is given to Jesus Christ, who has been entrusted with all authority in heaven and on earth. There is therefore no room for anything whatsoever which is not in subjection to Christ. The fact that we find many people and institutions and nations in rebellion against Christ does not in the slightest bit detract from his authority; it merely means that they are storing up wrath for themselves against the day of judgement when Christ shall exercise his authority, granted to him by the Father, to call all these to account for their rebellion.

The idea that anything is "secular" is a myth, a fiction, spiritual adultery, and the reason for the death and destruction we find in much of modern life. How can anything that God has made be of no interest to him? How can anything subject to Christ be legitimately considered to have its own authority or power and not be accountable to him? There is nothing made that Christ has not made, no creature, no institution, no relationship, which has not been made possible by God who created all things in Christ, so that institutions and relationships and activities are possible in accordance with the way that God made them.

If then there is no compartment we can call the "secular," what is it that we have separated out and called the "spiritual"? That is simply the orientation of our life to God. There are two choices facing us as human beings: we can choose to worship and serve our creator, or we can worship and serve other gods. There is no other possibility. We are created as worshipping creatures, and worship we must, since it is impossible for us to alter the character of our existence. The root of our existence is our religious commitment, and from that flows all the rest of life. Whether we

acknowledge God or rebel against him are the two options facing us. And those who rebel against God will then seek out other gods to serve, other sources of meaning for their lives. We can see the effects of this rebellion, this idolatry, all around us. Society is fragmenting, disintegrating, losing its way and losing its grip, simply because the competing forces at work in it are tearing it apart. These competing forces are simply the commitments we have made to different creatures as the source of meaning for life, and as we have all chosen different creatures to serve as the source of meaning, we end up competing for dominance and influence over each other, arguing that only our god can provide meaning for life.

But the result of this is disintegration, as we are serving creatures not meant to be considered the source of meaning for our lives. All the creatures that God has made are woven into a fabric with interlocking relationships and bonds. His world is a perfectly made world, harmonious and unified. It is a glorious whole which serves and glorifies the God who made it as the creatures within it fulfill their appointed tasks. So to consider one of the creatures within this integral whole as the source of meaning for the rest, or even for part of the rest, is to rend apart the fabric God has made; to distort and destroy, to isolate and fragment it. Do you see then why idolatry can only bring destruction? Do you see why worship of false gods leads to tragic consequences for the rest of the creation, and even for that which is treated as a god? Do you see then why separating life into the spiritual and the secular is unavoidably to concur with idolatry?

The "spiritual" aspect of our lives is not a part separated and isolated from the rest. It is not a group of activities which we do which have little or no relevance to the rest of life. It is not what we do in a particular time or place, or with a particular group of people. It is the deepest root of our existence, it is the source of our activities in life, it is that orientation of the heart in commitment to either the true God or to a god-substitute, which gives direction and power to all that we do. Our Christian faith, then, is not something which we can add to the rest of our life, which remains unchanged. It is not an optional extra, a lifestyle choice, a preference some may express. It is an acknowledgement that God is the only source of true life, the only source of meaning, the only one who can put our lives back together and integrate all that we do. Everything that we do in life is spiritual, since it is directed and empowered by the

commitment we make in our hearts, the centre of our existence, where we choose how we are going to respond to God. We cannot avoid having a relationship with God; it is not something we can add on to our lives, which otherwise are complete and independent. We are related to God whether we like it or not, since we are his creatures, formed to serve him and to love him, and unavoidably dependent on him for everything. The choice we face is, will we respond to God in faith and love, or will we rebel against him? Will our commitment to God work itself out in a distinctive and life-giving way in our schools, in our workplace, in our homes, in our sports clubs and our business enterprises, or will we follow alien gods and false sources of meaning for our lives in these areas, instead of finding their meaning in Christ?

One of the reasons that Christians are often confused about what it means to inherit eternal life and to live a new life in Christ is that we speak of this in an upside-down manner in our evangelism. Those who do not believe are exhorted to invite Christ into their lives, to make room for him and to accept him as their saviour. But this is the direct opposite of what the Scriptures teach us. It is not that we should make room for Christ in our lives, deciding as independent creatures with our own status and authority, whether or not to accept him and invite him in, but rather, it is for God to accept us. It is God who makes room for us, in his grace granting us life instead of reserving us for eternal death. As we read in Matthew 28, Christ has full and final authority over all things in heaven and on earth, an authority which has been granted to him by the Father. As a result, Christ gave the command to go into all the world and make disciples, teaching them to obey everything which he has commanded.

It is not a matter of whether or not we will decide to extend the invitation to Christ to enter our lives, accepting him as our saviour (as if we had any right to refuse him), but recognising that we are all, without exception, sinners who deserve only God's anger and judgement. God has in his grace provided a way to life for us: repentance and faith, turning from our old ways, the ways of death, and submitting to Christ, the supreme authority over heaven and earth: Christ the risen and ascended King. Through faith in him we are made heirs of God, joint heirs with Christ, and are granted eternal life so that we may not die but live forever. Even though we must pass through death, this is now only as a sleep from which we shall be awoken by the blast

of the angelic trumpet at the return of Christ, when all those who believe in him will be raised from the dead and transformed in glory and immortality. So even if we die, we shall live forever!

The question is, then, not how can we accept Christ, but how can Christ accept us? What is it that we can do that will turn aside the wrath of God and gain access for us to eternal life? The answer is, of course, absolutely nothing. There is no way any of us can make ourselves right with God. We cannot decide to accept Christ, we cannot receive him into our lives; we can only turn our lives over to him and submit to him as supreme Lord, the only legitimate authority against whom we are presently in rebellion. Christ is in our lives already, as creator, sustainer and lord. He is either our saviour or our judge, depending on whether we acknowledge him or not; but Christ is there regardless. How then will we respond? In faith, or in continued rebellion against our rightful Lord?

God will accept us only in Christ. There is no other means by which he can accept us, for without the death of Christ ransoming us we have no way of entering into life. Without Christ, we are lost. Without Christ, there is no escape from the wrath of God. Without Christ, we are all alone and dependent solely on our own devices. And who of us is able to save himself or herself? No one. It is only when we recognise the sheer futility of all our own efforts, all our pretences and all our impotence before God that we can see what God has done for us in Christ. Because in Christ it has all been done for us. There is nothing we are able to do, and praise God there is nothing that we need to do! All we are called on to do is to place our trust in Christ, to put our faith in him. That is, we are to abandon all our own efforts, all our desires to contribute at least something to our own salvation, all pretence that there is something that God can receive from us that he does not already own completely. All we can say is, Lord, I believe. To cling to any other hope is to cling to death. To seek any other way is to follow the broad way and to miss the narrow gate. Anything but total abandonment on God is futile and empty, for it has all been done in Christ; there is nothing we can add to it, nothing we can take away from it. Christ alone is our salvation, and to cast ourselves on him is to enter into life. And that life is not life as we know it: it is a life which comes from above, a life which has its source in God, and not in anything in this world. Because it is a life from outside of our own situation, it is a life which can

deliver us from our situation. There is no other answer for the path of death and destruction which we are following, for apart from Christ we are all in the grip of the law of sin and death.

As a result of being purchased at the cost of the death of God's own Son, we are now no longer our own, but slaves to the one who bought us, God himself. It is no longer our own life that we lead, but the life of Christ, who is living in us. We no longer have a life of our own to lead; our lives are hidden in Christ, and Christ now lives in us. That life is given only to the one who loses his life; for to hold onto our own life is to forfeit the eternal life offered to us by God. And it is only through faith in Christ that we enter into life. Believing in him is the only way to life: every other way leads only to death. Faith in Christ sets us free from the law of sin and death, and ushers us into a new life.

Christ has been sent to us as the one who will redeem our lives from destruction and deliver us from the power of death. Christ comes to offer to us his life, not life as we know it, but life that comes from outside of our present situation, life that comes from God, eternal life. Christ says that he came in order that we might have life, and have it to the full.

But what do we know of this life? If we take a hard, honest look at ourselves, do we see this life manifested in our midst? Do we see signs of life lived to the full? Do we see indications of hope in the midst of strife? Are there fresh initiatives and new ideas in which we see shining the light of life which Christ has given to us? Can we say to the hurting world around us, a world full of the pain of unemployment and social fragmentation, a world of racial conflict and class strife, that we can point to a better way, not somewhere out beyond the horizon but in our very midst? Is the life of Christ real in us? And if not, where then are those outside the church to witness this life? There is a call to us then to return to God, to find in him alone the source of meaning, the source of life, who points us to the path to follow that leads to wholeness and salvation. And only then will we find the life that God gives us being worked out in our midst, pointing to a new way of living, a new meaning and direction, so that all that we are involved in as God's creatures will once again be oriented to Him in obedience and love. We will see Christians making new initiatives in education, in industrial relations, in politics, in economics, in job creation and scientific discovery.

The claim that Christ is the answer for the problems of the world will become a reality in our midst, and the fragmentation of our lives, even the compartmentalisation of the lives of Christians into spiritual and secular, will fall away and we will once again be able to live as whole people, recognising and acknowledging the Lordship of Christ in everything that we do in a way that actually makes sense and significance.

As a result we will not be able to continue to live individualistic lives, lives which have no regard to others, lives which do not share in the community of believers, lives which are independent and isolated, since it is only within the community of believers that we can find the integral wholeness which God designed us to have. None of us are self-sufficient; we are dependent on others for everything, and others depend on us. There is no true life which is not communal life, a life shared with others, a life sustained by and with others, a life which recognises the integral nature of the whole of creation and of our part in it. Only by being part of the community of faith can we contribute to and receive from the life that we share together, and only then is it possible for many of the things we are called to do to become realities in our lives. Schools, trade unions, business enterprises, art galleries, orchestras, political movements, scientific research, medical centres, newspapers, and so on, all these things require communal action, and if we as Christians are to see our life in Christ work itself out in giving direction and meaning to the whole of our existence, then it is only as we work together that we can see Christian alternatives coming into being in all these areas and more. Then we will see what it means to live life to the full, just as Christ intended for us.

We can respond to the call to faith and obedience in the whole of life either as the disciples who turned back and no longer followed Christ, or else we can answer with Simon Peter, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." John 6:68. There is no other path to go; Christ alone can lead us into life, a life lived to the full. Will we follow him, or will we choose instead the broad way that leads only to destruction?