

# Fullness of Life

*A sermon on John 10:1-10 by Nathan Nettleton, 30 April 2023*

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## Message

Jesus's main purpose for us is that we (individually and collectively) have fullness of life.

## Sermon

If you want to start a big argument among a group of Christians of different persuasions some time, try asking this question: which one line statement in the Bible best sums up the reason Jesus came? Or in other words, summarise in one sentence what Jesus wanted to accomplish with his life and ministry.

Some would argue that Jesus came primarily to show us how we can be saved, and so they would perhaps argue for Ephesians 2:8 – “for it is by God’s grace that you have been saved through faith. It is not the result of works, but God’s gift.” Or perhaps Galatians 3:11 – “Only the person who is put right with God through faith shall live.”

Others would argue that first and foremost Jesus came to break the power of sin, and so perhaps they’d vote for Romans 6:6 – “and we know that our old being has been put to death with Christ on his cross, in order that the power of the sinful self might be destroyed, so that we should no longer be slaves of sin.”

Perhaps some would go further and even argue that Jesus came to show us which sins it’s most important to get rid of, and they’d vote for one of those lists like Colossians 3:5 – “You must put to death the earthly desires at work in you, such as sexual immorality, indecency, lust, evil passions, and greed.” For some reason, those people often seem to put a lot more emphasis on the sexual immorality than on the greed, despite the weight of the biblical evidence clearly being heavily the other way around.

Some people would argue that Jesus was a teacher who came to explain God’s law to us, and they’d vote for John 13:34 – “And now I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you so you must love one another,” or perhaps Matthew 22:39 – “Love your neighbour as you love yourself.”

There are people who would take a political and social justice bent and argue that Jesus came to reform society. They might vote for Luke 4:18 – “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has chosen me to bring good news to the poor,” or maybe Luke 18:22 – “Sell all you have and give the money to the poor, and you will have riches in heaven; then come and follow me.”

All of these verses are significant, and I certainly wouldn’t be dismissing any of them, but I wouldn’t really accept any of them as a sufficient summary of Jesus’s overall goal. My vote would probably go with John 10:10, the last verse of the gospel reading we heard a few minutes ago – “I have come in order that you might have life, life in all its fullness.”

I’d also be reasonably open to being talked into John 3:16 – “For God loved the world so much that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life.” My only reservation about that one is that it now carries a lot of unhelpful

baggage, and we would need to make sure that the words “believe” and “eternal” are carefully defined or else it is too easy to misunderstand it. The word “believe” means more than just signing your name against a doctrinal statement, and the word “eternal” says more about quality than about time span. But once those things are made clear, the two verses are saying essentially the same thing. “I have come in order that you might have life, life in all its fullness.”

It is the verse our church motto was based on when we chose it many years ago, our one line summary of our purpose: seeking and sharing the fullness of life.

“I have come in order that you might have life, life in all its fullness.”

All the rest of those contenders are captured up in that somewhere: personal salvation, breaking the power of sin, loving relationships, renewed human community, religious and social justice. And a lot of them can only be properly understood when you understand them in light of this mission statement. Commandments about doing away with greed and immorality sound very gloomy, and even threatening, until you realise that Jesus sees them as obstacles to your experience of life’s fullness. Jesus is not obsessed with morality, he’s obsessed with life in all its fullness, and morality is merely a means to that end.

Some of you will feel uncomfortable about some of this being spelled out, because it can sound like I’m downgrading the importance of some very important things. You may squirm a bit in your seats if I say fullness of life is more important to Jesus than salvation from sin, or fullness of life is more important to Jesus than social justice. But hear me out.

Jesus, and the God we have come to know in Jesus, are not primarily motivated by a desire to fix problems. They did not create the world in order to have a whole bunch of problems to fix so they could keep themselves interested and occupied. Salvation, social justice and morality are all about fixing problems.

Salvation is only relevant if there is something or someone that needs to be saved from some danger. Something has gone wrong and salvation is about putting it right again. Social justice is only an interesting topic in the face of social injustice. If we had always lived in a completely just world, we would have never even invented the word. Something has gone wrong and social justice is about putting it right again. So too with morality. If we weren’t so frequently faced with the pain and brokenness caused by people’s immoral behaviour we would never have cause to think about morality. Something has gone wrong and morality is about putting it right again.

There can be absolutely no doubt that Jesus is involved in all these causes, but if he’d had his way, these things would not have gone wrong in the first place and therefore they wouldn’t need fixing.

What would Jesus be on about then? Life – life in all its fullness. The world was created because God loves life and loves to bless life and enjoy life. We were created because God wanted to love us and bless us, because that is what God loves doing. We were not created so we could go wrong and need fixing.

We have some very keen and excellent gardeners in our church. John does a wonderful job of developing and maintaining the gardens around our church building. Jill has always been a wonderful gardener. And Paul presides over one of the best suburban block native Australian gardens you could ever wish to see.

But none of them established their gardens with the ultimate goal being to give themselves opportunities for removing snails and pulling out weeds. The aim of the gardens is not to attract pests so that they can have fun removing them. If they remove snails, it is not because removing pests is what fills them with joy, it is because they love their gardens and get great joy from watching them grow and flourish. The removal of pests and the pulling out of weeds is to ensure that that flourishing growth is not hindered, it is not the purpose of the exercise in itself.

Jesus Christ's battles with sin and injustice and immorality are like the gardeners' battle with the pests and weeds. They are simply undertaken to remove any obstacles to all of creation and humanity growing and flourishing in the fullness of life. Jesus's primary passion, his primary desire is to see everybody and everything enjoying unhindered, unthreatened fullness of life, here and now.

I think we often have a bit of a false picture of what the world would be like if nothing had gone wrong and everything was as perfect as it was intended to be. We often have this very static, unchanging view of it, nothing much can happen because everything is so perfect, and it all sounds a bit boring really. That is not the biblical image of perfection. The biblical image of perfection is a dynamic growing idea.

If we can return to those gardens for a moment, the perfect garden would not be one where the perfect flowers just stayed in bloom all the time and nothing ever happened. The perfect garden would grow and flourish and be born and mature and fade and blossom again in the cycles of nature. The big difference would be that it would maintain a balance in its cycles so that even the snails would have a place and wouldn't get out of hand. The flourishing of life would be so overflowing and abundant that the demise of one plant would be celebrated as the giving of life of another rather than mourned as the victory of death in the garden.

In the perfected world we won't be sitting around bored on clouds with harps. Instead we will be being born and be growing and be maturing and be enjoying all the joys and goodness of life. Love and blessing are not things that have a maximum level called perfection. They are things that grow and mature and flourish, always changing, always evolving.

You know that from your relationships with lovers or friends or family. Love is not something that plateaus at a maximum level and then just becomes boringly static and unchanging. Perfection is not a static upper limit, because there is no upper limit. The more love grows the more dynamic and exciting it becomes. The fullness of life that Christ came to open up our access to, is like that.

When we celebrate a short rite in a few minutes to mark the progress of Ruth's journey in the catechumenate towards the fullness of baptismal life, we are celebrating a journey that we hope and pray will continue all through her life, not just plateau out somewhere and never deepen further. Even the baptism towards this part of the journey is directed is not an end in

itself, but a further step into the depths of life in all its fullness, in all its ever-deepening abundance.

The fullness of life that Christ came to open up our access to is a diverse, flourishing, exuberant life in which we are ever increasingly aware and appreciative of the beauty and joy and magical fullness of any given moment. Here and now, Jesus is calling us all on, further into the depth and abundance of it all. Here and now, the next step opens before us.