

Eternal God and Father,
you create and redeem us
by the power of your love:
guide and strengthen us by your Spirit,
that we may give ourselves
in love and service
to one another and to you;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Common Worship Daily Prayer





PART ONE

Reflecting:
what have
we received?

The purpose of Part One is to set our questions about human identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage in the context of God's gift of life.

Chapter 1 invites us to wonder at the gift of abundant, eternal life that is offered to us through the redemptive life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Chapter 2 shows us that this gift of life is a gift of relationship. It explores some of the characteristics of our relationships that flow from God's gift of life, a gift renewed through the reconciling work of Jesus Christ and made known in the community of love formed around him.

Chapter 3 explores one element of this life of love and faith. It explains the biblical and historical roots of the church's understanding of marriage as a lifelong, faithful relationship between one man and one woman.

Chapter 4 draws Part One to an end with an explanation of how, in the rest of the book, we will go about learning together - being taught together by Christ - about human identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage. It explains the rationale for engaging with the Bible, the church's tradition, history and the sciences in the search for truth. It explores how and why we also need to be good observers of the world in which God has placed us, and of the lived experiences which call us to understand God's presence in human experience.

CHAPTER 1

The gift of life

A meditation on the Gospel of John

From void and darkness, from utter nothingness, comes life (Genesis 1.2). An explosion of life: light, land, water, vegetation, living creatures of every kind, all of them created by God.

Among them is humankind, male and female, made in God's 'image' and 'likeness' to be faithful and fruitful (Genesis 1.26-31).

God speaks life into being, and it is good: abundantly, breathtakingly good and wonderfully diverse. God gives life.



The Bible begins with God and the life that God gives. It ends with 'the grace of the Lord Jesus' (Revelation 22.21) and an invitation from the Spirit and the bride: 'Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift' (Revelation 22.17). It ends with life again, and with God. But this is not the old life, the life with which the story began, the life soon to be spoiled. It is *new* life, life in a new heaven and a new earth where death, the very antithesis of life, is no more (Revelation 21.4). God renews life.

The first chapter of the Gospel of John is a pivotal moment in this biblical journey from life to life. It begins where the first book began, 'In the beginning' (John 1.1). It tells of the Word that was spoken there - the Word that 'was with God and was God', bringing 'all things...into being' (John 1.3). The Word spoken with God's breath that gives life. The Word that brings light to all and overcomes the dark. The Word, the Gospel tells us, that 'became flesh and lived among us' (John 1.14).

This Word was sent in love from the source of life to renew and restore all life, all that has been stained by tears and lost in death. 'We have seen his glory', says the Gospel, a glory that is 'full of grace and truth' (John 1.14). This Word-made-flesh is, in other words, true life, life in all its fulness, from which we receive 'grace upon grace' (John 1.16).

It is this very fulness of life that those who became Jesus' first disciples recognize in him when, in his first spoken words in the Gospel, he asks them a question. 'What are you looking for?' he says (John 1.38), a question that is full of grace, searching out the truth that is in them. What are you seeking? What are you longing for? What is it that you desire? 'Rabbi' they respond (John 1.38). (John, in an aside to the reader, tells us that a Rabbi is a teacher.) They instinctively perceive, in other words, that Jesus is someone with something to teach them. In Jesus there is something to be found, some truth, some grace, some life.

'Where are you staying?', they ask (John 1.38), recognizing that to take hold of this life that is in Jesus they will need to be with him. Jesus' reply is startlingly simple. 'Come and see', he says (John 1.39). Come and see that I dwell with God as I dwell with you. Come and see the life of heaven living on earth. Come and see God's life renewing and restoring human life, giving 'power to become children of God' (John 1.11). Come to be - to dwell - with me.

'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly', said Jesus (John 10.10). But to bring this life to us will cost him dearly. People prefer darkness to light. We choose hate over love. We reject life and court death. 'I am the good shepherd', promises Jesus (John 10.11). He is no 'hired hand' (John 10.12) who deserts the sheep when the wolves come to snatch them away or when thieves come to steal their lives. Jesus is ready to lay down his life for the life of others, and steal away death, for ever. Jesus knows 'the ruler of this world is coming' (John 14.30), turning people away from the truth that will set them free, turning them in upon themselves in ways that will enslave and destroy them. Jesus is ready to confront every evil that deprives us of life and to conquer it.

'Father, the hour has come', Jesus prays (John 17.1). Soon we see him as he said we would, lifted high (on the cross): flesh given for 'the life of the world' (John 6.51), blood poured out that we may no longer live in hate and perish in death. Truly, said John the Baptist, 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!' (John 1.29).

Mary of Magdala, whose life had been scarred by evil but whom Jesus had befriended and delivered, meets him at his tomb. She hears a question through her tears, a familiar sort of question, 'full of grace and truth' (John 1.14). 'For whom are you looking?' (John 20.15). And then she hears her name, 'Mary'. 'Rabbouni', she responds (John 20.16). Once again John reminds us of the importance of this word: *teacher*. And once again the truth Jesus makes known to her is something thoroughly new, a truth she proclaims down through the ages: 'I have seen the Lord' (John 20.18). God's life has defeated death. God's light has overcome darkness. God's love triumphs. The enemy of death that has drawn the life out of life through lies and enmity, betrayal and hate, injustice and conflict is overwhelmed. Truly, Jesus said, 'I am the resurrection and the life' (John 11.25).

'This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you sent' (John 17.3). Jesus has spoken of a new kind of life throughout his ministry. He has lived out this new sort of life, the life that comes 'from above' (John 8.23), life that is called eternal. He has brought that life to the world: water into wine, sickness into health, paralysis into movement, doubt and fear into faith and joy, lack of bread into abundance, blindness into sight,

even death into life. Now, close to his own death, Jesus prays that we may know what lies at the heart of this new life.

Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them. (John 17.25,26)

This is the love we yearn for, the love we thirst for: the love of God that is the heart of God's life, the love that can flow through us like 'rivers of living water' as we come to Christ and drink of God's Spirit (John 7.37-39).

John tells us at the beginning of the Gospel that it is 'God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known' (John 1.18). Here, in Jesus' prayer, he prays that the eternal love with which he has been loved by his eternal Father may be in us.

Jesus' prayer that we may be where he is makes sense of what Jesus has said before about believing in him and following him. Will we believe in - trust and put our faith in - the love that God has for us in Jesus - love that God has opened up for us in sending Jesus? This love is the truth of Jesus, and 'whoever believes in the Son has eternal life' (John 3.36). Will we truly and fully entrust ourselves to this love by receiving the one through whom it has come? This love, this 'grace upon grace' (John 1.16) is the way of Jesus, and 'whoever disobeys the Son will not see life' (John 3.36). Will we live this way of love, obeying Jesus' command to love as he loves, laying down our lives for our friends as Jesus laid down his life for those he called no longer servants but friends (John 15.15)? And will we refuse, as one of John's letters puts it, to hate our brother or sister (1 John 4.20)? Believing Jesus' truth, living Jesus' way is life: 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly' (John 10.10).

'Choose life so that you and your descendants may live', says the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 30.19). 'Take hold of the life that really is life', says the New (1 Timothy 6.19). The invitation to live fully runs through John's Gospel. Nicodemus wrestles with it in the cool of the night and finds that God has done a new thing with him and with his people (John 3.1-6). The Samaritan woman rejoices in it in the heat of the day and finds a new dignity in herself and in her community. A crowd learns to see a sinner differently because of it, and to give her space to live again, differently (John 4.7-42). Martha and Mary

are astounded by it, and believe it, *believe him*, and their family is renewed (John 11.1-53). Pontius Pilate interrogates and condemns it, *condemns him*, and turns away. He turns in the same direction as many do in every age and culture when they cannot see the truth God sets before their eyes, taking another step in the way of darkness and death (John 18.28-38). The greater power of light and life is demonstrated when God raises Jesus from the tomb and as the risen Christ breathes the Spirit of life - the breath of God - on his disciples (John 20.1-23).

The life that God has for us is shown in profound acts of humility as feet are washed and lives recast to serve. It is demonstrated in gestures of acceptance and words of forgiveness that heal and set free. It is shaped in a new community of friendship as people, very different people, gather around the same teacher, and learn to love each other as he loves them. God's eternal love - love that brings life, eternal life - is experienced in Christ's community of love. It is experienced in a community bound together in a hard-won friendship and led into the truth of love by the Spirit, the advocate of God's love in Christ. It is a new community of faith and love that has placed its hope in Jesus Christ, and found that 'All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure' (1 John 3.3). It is here we find that very life about which the Spirit and the bride - the heavenly people of God gathered from all tribes and peoples and languages - say, 'Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift' (Revelation 22.17). This is the life that brings all things into being (John 1.3), the life that enlightens all people (John 1.4,9), the life that binds creation together in a shared existence (Colossians 1.15-17).

So the gift that God gives to all creation is life. It is a gift generated in each of us as we are brought to birth and live out our lives. It is a gift that Christ came to raise into a fulness of life that continues beyond death. This gift of life that is for everyone and is without limit can only be fully known together - together with God and each other, together in families and communities, together in relationships, friendships and marriages, together in the life of Jesus' body, the Church. For the life that God gives is life *together*.