

Life in the Real World

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Preacher: The Rt. Rev. Mike Hill

- [0 : 00] I think most of you will have picked up on the fact that today we're celebrating Harvest Thanksgiving. And it reminds me to thank those of you who brought goods which are behind me now, stacked up on the stage here.
- And just to let you know that they will be distributed between Andrew House and also the Clevedon Food Bank. So what you see here will go to help those who are going through a difficult time in their lives.
- And those gifts go with our love and our prayers to Andrew House and to the Clevedon Food Bank. Before I preach, let's just bow our heads and pray together.
- Our gracious Father, we thank you for your most gracious provision. Lord, we thank you for the food that we have to eat and the drink that we have to drink.
- And Lord, we pray for those who for whatever reasons either have no food nor drink. And we pray that our gifts may nourish them. But Father too, we thank you for the provision of your word.
- [1 : 21] And we thank you for the provision of your word. And we thank you, Father, that your word is truth. And we pray, Lord, that as we sit together now, so you would send your spirit upon your people gathered.
- Lord, help us to discern your truth. And Lord, may your truth set us free to be the people you call us to be in Jesus Christ our Lord.
- Amen. Amen. I want to preach on a verse from the reading that Suzanne just read to us. Jesus said to the man who he had here, What do you see?
- He looked up and said, I see people. They look like trees walking around. Once more, Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes. Then his eyes were opened.
- I don't know whether it crossed your mind as we sang earlier, lustily, we plough the fields and scatter.
- [2 : 27] But I wonder what, if a Martian arrived on earth and came to church, and for the sake of poetic license, let's pretend that he understood English, or that via nanotechnology managed to download Google Translator into his brain, what would he make of it?
- What would he make of a bunch of suburban people, most of us, I guess, didn't make our money from agriculture, singing hymns like that?
- We plough the fields and scatter. Well, we don't. And it struck me that what the Martian might conclude is that we'd lost touch with reality somehow.
- Back in the annals of history, Karl Marx, who is attributed to be the founder of socialism and communism, wrote this, he said, religion is the sigh of an oppressed people, the heart of a heartless world.
- And then he said, it is the opium of the people. What did he mean by that? Well, what Marx meant was, he looked at the world around him to kind of people.
- [3 : 52] And he thought that religion for them was like opium. It was something that transported them away from reality. Of course, in the mind of Karl Marx, reality was the class struggle.

But did he have a point? Is there any way that you could look at the faith which we espouse in the 21st century and conclude that we gather together to communally stop facing up to reality?

That's a very big question. And today, reality is really up for grabs. A lot of contemporary philosophers are writing around the theme, what is reality?

Well, reality is the state of things as they actually exist. They're not about a notion or an idea. It's about what we agree is in front of us, is real.

You can tell there's a crisis of reality. Does anybody remember David Icke? He used to be the guy who kind of anchored Grandstand on BBC television.

[5 : 09] I think most of you will remember that. David Icke, in an interview, described himself as the son of God and then went on to say that the global elite, that is our politicians and in this country our royal family, are basically large amphibious creatures who are able to take on human form and their habits are child sacrifice and drinking blood.

Now, would you say David Icke was in touch with reality? Somebody say no for crying out loud. Look, here's the thing.

He has two million followers who believe that. Two million people who seem to have lost all touch with reality.

Marx accused us, us people who would claim faith, that we had this weird notion that somehow by coming together and worshipping God, we could avoid reality.

Let me give you two examples why today somebody might look at the Church of God, the Church of England in particular, and think that it has no connection with reality.

[6 : 36] In 1967, a man called Leslie Paul wrote an epic report for the Church of England. In it, one of the things he said, he said many things, but one of the things he said was the idea of a paid clergy person in every parish up and down this land, trained, pensioned, and given a stipend, was untenable into the future.

The House of Bishops gave it about 45 seconds airtime at their meeting and dismissed the whole thing. And pretty well, through to the mid-80s, continued to deny the reality of what Leslie Paul was writing about with the effect now that churches up and down this country are mostly collections of parishes.

I mean, we are extremely blessed in Christ's Church that whoever becomes the vicar of Christ's Church has only this church to look after and this parish. You only need to go down the road to find a clergy of responsibility for six parishes or seven parishes.

In other words, the only way that the bishops and the general synod of the Church of England could imagine that the church could be made tenable was by giving people jobs that actually aren't that possible.

What do you say? They ignored the reality of Leslie Paul's report. Let me bring it a little closer to home. All over the church, not just the Church of England, there are parents who truly lament the fact that their children have rejected the faith that they hold.

[8 : 32] You know that's true. Some of you have a dull ache in your heart because your children rejected the faith that is yours. It is really painful and I wish there were time to go into it this morning, but what I do want to say to you very clearly is it very likely is not your fault.

There are other pressures on our children, always peer group pressure. I often think to myself, you know, I thank God that I was converted to the Christian faith.

You know, when your kids were young, there was always one kid that you never wanted your kids to play with. And my mum, you know, imagined that there were people who she didn't want me to play with except that everybody else's parents, I was the kid that everybody else's parents thought they shouldn't play with.

Peer group pressure is huge and today pray for our parents, friends, because they have a terribly difficult job. why social media, which is peer group pressure on speed.

It is horrible, it is a scourge. Maybe some of you saw the documentary on BBC television this last week about the disappearance of Nicola Bulley.

[10 : 03] You may remember that she was this lady who took her dog for a walk and disappeared completely. And they discovered that she'd gone missing when her dog turned up at the kids' school and then they found her mobile phone on a bench.

The police invested huge amounts of money in a professional search, diving teams, you name it. They could not find her for three weeks. During that time, social media sleuths travelled up to near Preston to a village called Inskip, walked along the banks of the river, got in the way of the police investigation and then went on social media and promulgated the most foul rumours imaginable.

Many of them writing to the husband who had a cast-iron alibi as to why he couldn't have pushed his wife in or drowned her. People are writing to him saying, we know what you did.

Whatever good there can be in social media, every day people's lives are being wrecked by it. And we should take notice of that.

I mean, God bless Jonathan Haidt for writing his book, Warning of the Dangers of Exposing Our Children to Social Media at Too Young an Age. In other words, exposing them to social media because in developing brains, it can rewire the circuitry of our brains.

[11 : 43] The poor report our unwillingness to face the reality together of our children who reject our faith. faith. And the reality becomes very obscure.

So I want to say to you very briefly just three things about that. The first is, God is ultimate reality. reality. And it's the starting point for any Christian believer.

We're not big on saying creeds in our church, but interestingly, the first two words of the creeds are, we believe. Not a notion, not an idea, but stated as an objective fact.

The fact that Jesus, who was the Son of God, in John's Gospel, said stuff like, I am the way, the truth, and life. That is the God that Jesus reveals to us.

Everything I am, everything I ever will be, everything I have, is a gift from God. And on this harvest Thanksgiving day, remembering that won't do any of us any harm.

[13 : 12] nothing can be more real than God. Nothing can be more true than God. But the problem is, this is not deducible knowledge, it is revealed knowledge.

When Ian Ramsey wrote his massive book, I don't recommend it to you, I think it's 790 pages, Bishop of Durham, Ian Ramsey, wrote a book called Religious Language.

He speculated four chapters on the writings of philosophers of language like Wittgenstein and these people, but in the end, he summed it down into one small phrase.

He says, when the penny drops, when our eyes are opened, and we see God for who he is. Norwegian Roman Catholic Bishop, Erik Vada, I think his name is, talks about his conversion to the faith, which wasn't like a kind of classic evangelical conversion, it was that he suddenly realized that only God could explain the totality of the created world.

His eyes were opened, as you might say. I met a man last Friday who was a pastor of a Baptist church in Bristol.

[14 : 46] I was in Bristol for 14 years, I promise you, I had never heard of this church. It was brought to my attention when I went to the praying for Clevedon meeting, and this guy who's a pastor there turned up because he lives in Clevedon, and feels a burden for the town.

He told me that in their church, they were a small Baptist church, had 40 members, on a faceless estate called Hillfield, which I confess I had never heard of.

I think the only public building on this estate was the church. And they thought to themselves, well, with 40 people, what can we do? And they decided that they would focus entirely on God.

So what did they do? They stopped all their weekly activities, they stopped all the home groups, they stopped everything, and they met together for a time of worship and prayer.

He said the impact was amazing. People's eyes were opened to a new revelation of God. we might agree that the church today requires a reformation or a reset or a revival.

[16 : 11] But I wonder if anything like that will be preceded by a renewed vision of God and who He is. R.A.

Torrey said once, off-quoted by David Watson, he loved this quote, R.A. Torrey said, if God decided to withdraw the Holy Spirit from the church, 95% of what we do would continue as normal.

Does that sound like it could be focused on God? I'm just asking the question. What might happen if those of us who are half-hearted, those of us who mean well, those of us who would like to be a little better thought of in our walk with God?

What would happen if we focused on God? What would happen if our eyes were open and we saw things as God sees them and we saw God as God is?

My second point is, first point is God is ultimate reality. Second point is, faith is seeing. In Mark chapter 6, I beg your pardon, in Mark chapter 8, we read of the healing of this man who was touched by Jesus, and Jesus said, you know, is that okay?

[17 : 43] What are you looking at? He said, I'm looking, people look like trees to me. So Jesus put his hand on him again, and his vision was cleared, and he saw again, and knew about the power of God on his life.

The guy at Hillfield told me, they weren't particularly looking for this, but when they refocused on God, people started to get healed. People who had long term problems came to their worship meetings, there's no big deal of, you know, some hysterical preacher at the front trying to knock them over, or whatever.

People began to be healed. Many, many years ago, God gave me this vision of the church as a place where people should be healed.

I didn't mean by that, that I'd stand at the front historically trying to, you know, pull people's arms along or anything like that. No, what I thought would happen would be.

Just by being the people of God together would be a healing experience for people who came to it. I still have that vision.

[19 : 07] And we need the help of the Holy Spirit to live as though we believe in the amazing power, personality, being of God.

We won't do that on our own. You remember in Luke 24 after the resurrection, Jesus is walking with some of the disciples who hung out with him for at least three years before he ascended into heaven.

And they didn't recognize him. And Jesus said, come on, let's eat, I mean, I'm paraphrasing, let's eat breakfast together. And he broke some bread and in that moment, it says their eyes were open and they recognized who it was.

Not a dead corpse in some cave in Israel, no. A living man who had come back from the dead. let me ask you this, do your eyes need to be opened?

Do you feel you need a second touch from God? That you might understand the amazing reality that is God. Everything I am, everything I ever will be, everything I have is a gift from him.

[20 : 33] Their eyes were opened. And you know what? I've discovered that when your eyes are open, you don't just see God differently, you start looking at other people differently.

Luke chapter 19 is the story of Zacchaeus, you remember that, the funny little hated tax collector who climbed in a tree to see Jesus. Anybody in that population that were gathered around there would have loved to find an excuse to kill him.

But Jesus saw something in Zacchaeus that no other human being had observed. I like to think he looked at Zacchaeus and saw what Zacchaeus could be.

And do you know what? That's the way Jesus looks at you. And that's the way Jesus wants you to look at other people. What could they be? not what are they like now. We'll face the reality of that, but let's try and imagine with the help of the Holy Spirit what they could be in Jesus Christ.

Imagine how your life would be different if you put those spectacles on and started looking at people in that light. I mean, it probably would help for some of you if you started looking at your spouse in that light.

[21 : 58] Not what they are, what they could become. Many spiritual writers have written, I suppose in the early days of my Christian faith, it confused me.

They're talking about having faith helps you see. I now know what they're talking about. And finally, God and the whole creation, the Psalms, repeat, especially the Psalms towards the end of the Psalter.

reminders of the creative power of God. It starts in Genesis chapter 1. It goes through the New Testament. It goes to Isaiah chapter 11. Remember that it's not just us who will be saved at the end of time, it will be the whole of creation.

And Isaiah has this amazing vision, doesn't he, of lions lying down with lambs. I mean, as far as I can see, I've seen lions in the wild.

It's going to take a lot for them to become vegetarians, to be honest. Look, this is the work of salvation that God wants to bring to the world.

[23 : 14] Not just your life, but certainly your life, but the whole of creation. In Romans chapter 1, Paul's looking at a society that's losing touch with God.

And he writes these remarkable words. Romans chapter 1, give me one second to find it. Two seconds.

this is what he says. The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness.

I mean, that's another sermon, isn't it? Truth being suppressed by human wickedness. Since, this is what he says, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.

For since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities, his eternal power and divine nature have been clearly seen, being understood from what he has made.

[24 : 21] So that men, women, are without excuse. Have you ever, you may be a kind of artistic type and, you know, you've sat on the veranda of your house or on the balcony of your hotel and there's a lovely calm sea in front of you and the sun's going down and suddenly God becomes very viable in your mind and people will talk about how the world kind of helps them connect with God.

Well, that's a bit like Paul is talking about here. It gives a reason why people see something bigger than the creation in front of them when they wonder at it.

But that in itself won't save you, my friend. As I said, we might agree that the church needs a reset, a reformation, a revival, whatever word we like to put on it.

But maybe first, it needs a fresh revelation of God. Jesus said, I am the way, the truth, God, and life.

Is it possible that ordinary people like you and me could recapture a vision of God that would bring life to us and to our church?

[25 : 55] And I think this works best if we do it together as a matter of fact. you might today like to ask God for a second touch on your life, that your vision might be restored and you might truly see the living God who created the heavens and the earth and all that was in it.

and if that Martian had shown up here, would even have created that Martian with its advanced language skills.

Is this a moment? Is this a moment when the Holy Spirit might be whispering in your ear saying, come on, wake up, open your eyes, eyes.

I love stories like the Hillfield Baptist church story, because in a sense something happened that wasn't down to their effort. All they did was worship and wait on God.

And maybe in the end, there's something in there. Let's pray together. Our gracious Father, there are people in the house today who are going through really difficult times.

[27 : 29] Lord, people who, from a human point of view, can't see a way through it. They're hanging on to you, Father, but they cannot see what could be.

Lord, would you please give us together a fresh second touch, church, that our vision might be restored, that our eyes may be opened, that your church may wake up and bring life to those around us.

Come, Holy Spirit, set our hearts on fire with love for God, the ultimate reality, the one of whom it can be said, there can be nothing true than him who made the heavens and the earth and all that is in it, you and me.

Inspire us, Lord, we pray in Jesus' name and the people who agreed. Said together, Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.