

Life Assurance: The Way, The Truth & The Life - 18th September 2022

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[0 : 00] Today we're going to continue with the series Matt started a couple of weeks ago, which is all about life assurance. And I guess today we're going to start talking a little bit about getting lost and finding the way.

So when was the last time you felt completely lost? There are some smiles there. I guess it's a bit harder to get physically lost these days with smartphones and sat-navs.

No, we've got some shaking heads. People are still definitely getting physically lost. But somehow we all still manage it. The last time I remember feeling really, really lost, as in I had no idea how to get to where I wanted to get to next, was in January.

So in January when the church was closed, I took a bit of a pilgrimage and I came down on my bike going down from Kings Lynn to Canterbury. During that, I discovered that the lights that I got for my bike, which claimed that they would work for a thousand hours, inevitably did not last a thousand hours.

So there was one day when I was happily cycling along, thinking January is not really the best time to be doing this because it gets dark at about four o'clock. And I was going through this forest and it was really muddy. And I just thought, I can't see anything.

[1 : 16] I've got no idea where I am. And the mud is like this deep. Now, fortunately, in that particular instance, what actually happened is that I continued going down the hill and I eventually got to this nice pub called The Wicked Lady, where they were very, very nice to me.

Not wicked at all. And they charged my phone and they found me somewhere to stay for the night, which was very generous of them. So I guess sometimes I want to say, feeling lost can mean not knowing where to go next, not knowing what to do next, not knowing who to be next as well, I think, sometimes.

I think feeling lost can also sometimes mean losing a person, a place, a community that makes you feel grounded, that is a core of your identity, that helps you know who you are.

This can happen when you move house and you lose contact with a few people, when you're grieving, or when you just feel it's kind of difficult to make time to see the people that remind you who you are.

I suspect, talking to a couple of you, that there are some people in this community who feel like that today. People who feel that they've lost something or someone who is a constant in their life.

[2 : 39] And I guess the Queen is a possible example of that. Someone who embodied one of the symbols of what it means to be a person in this country. In many ways, for people without family, the Queen and the Royal Family symbolised family to them.

I know when I was working with a lot of people who lived on the streets, then the Royal Family was the family that they talked about. They talked about the dramas like you would your aunt or uncle. Oh, I can't believe that they're getting divorced again.

Those were the celebrations, the birthday parties that they celebrated. So I think sometimes when we come from our very privileged position, where we do have people to celebrate with, it's easy to forget what these people can be for people who don't have people to celebrate with.

However, it may be as much as anything else, the death of the Queen has actually brought up some of your own grief and reminded you of some of your other losses. I think some people are finding the idea that there's national mourning helpful in processing their loss, whereas others seem to be finding it more exhausting.

Both responses are, of course, completely reasonable. So today we're going to look at a passage from the last bit of John's Gospel. It's a section where Jesus has just told the disciples that he's going to die, and they're kind of processing that, and Jesus is giving what's called the farewell discourses.

[4 : 10] It's kind of an extended deathbed speech, really, but the day before, because I guess the next day was full of quite a lot of drama, where Jesus promises them that the Holy Spirit will be with them, implores them to work really hard at loving each other, and prays with them before he dies.

If you fancy it, reading from John 14 to John 17 sounds like a massive clip, but it's actually really worth it because it gives you this one really big, profound message about what it means to be a disciple, what it means to be church, and it's kind of Jesus' parting words to the church, to his friends.

So for today, we're going to have a tiny clip of that, which is Jesus talking to the disciples as they're starting to grieve, and they're feeling lost and afraid and isolated in the knowledge of Jesus' death, as perhaps you may feel today.

You may not. Both are fine. Or perhaps as you may have felt before in the past. So we're going to listen to the passage. Now first, we're going to listen to it in Cantonese.

And for you English speakers, I just want you to look at the pictures and really focus on the emotion. It will kind of give you a context for it when I read you the translation in just a sec. There are some amazing actors pulling this together.

[5 : 27] So if you just absorb yourself in the emotion of the video, it will help you feel your way into it. It will make it more real. when I give you the English translation in just a minute.... see!

You must not be afraid of your heart You must believe in God You must believe in me In my home, there are many places If there is no place, I will tell you I will go for you to prepare for the place If I will go for you to prepare for the place I will go for you to go to that place I will go for you to that place I will go for you to that place I will go for that place You will know that path He will say Lord, we will not know you to that place How can you know that path?

Jesus will say I will be the path, the truth, the truth If you will not be able to go for that place If you will not be able to go for that place If you will know me, you will know me You will know me From this time You will know him And you will know him And here is that same passage in English Jesus said to his disciples Don't let your hearts be troubled Believe in God Believe also in me In my Father's house, there are many dwelling places If it were not so Would I have told you I am going ahead to prepare a place for you And if I go and prepare a place for you I promise I will come again and take you to myself So that is where I am And there you will be also And you know the place I am going to

Thomas said to him Lord, we do not know where you are going How can we possibly know the way? Jesus said to him I am the way, the truth and the life No one comes to the Father except through me And if you know me You already know my Father also From now on, you do know him And you have seen him So this section from the farewell discourses Is a very traditional funeral verse You might have heard it several times before Perhaps we might even hear it tomorrow At the Queen's funeral It is a section which is often unpacked As talking about what heaven is like And to be clear I really do believe firmly that heaven exists That there is room for all of us To come exactly as we are And that we will meet each other And get there again in community But heaven is not what I am talking about today After death, I believe that you are in God's hands Which is of course the safest and the best place to be

My main interest in church today Is how we live well before death Which is of course the main thing That we have any control over now So let's start with the question that Thomas asks Thomas, probably speaking for all of the disciples Is feeling lost I think Thomas gets all of the good questions In the New Testament He asks all the really obvious things That everyone must have been wanting Lord, we do not know where you are going How can we find the way?

[8 : 55] How many times have I felt like this? Unsure of what to do next Where God will take me next No certainty about where I am going So I can plan I love planning I am one of these people who has a five year plan And actually completed it So you know I think it's nice to have a scheme But actually unfortunately The answer Jesus gives us Doesn't let you plan in five year intervals Or even longer than that It is instead a slightly more abstract thing I am the way That sort of means to me That sort of means to me You have to let go A little bit of the certainties And just walk sometimes Jesus sadly does not lay out A detailed map With exact next steps for the disciples But I guess sadly It rarely works out like that Mostly in my experience anyway You barely get to see the next step

Just as you take it Or at least that's how I find God reveals Where God is leading me to me However, Jesus does respond With this huge promise Which is so awesome It's almost impossible To get your head round I am the way I am the truth And the life This is such an important phrase In early Christianity That early Christians Weren't called Christians at all They were called followers of the way So this was one of their verses That they really took to heart I am the way I am the truth I am the life Let's unpick that a bit So it starts in the present tense I am I am now the way Not after I've conquered death Not when I return again But right now and forever I am the way I'm the way for you now Not when you've turned your life around And started attending church And become an awfully good Christian But right now

Wherever you are On your journey of life I am the way that is always at your feet You don't need to search for it Or worry about losing it At any time No matter who you are No matter where you've come from Or what you've done The way is there waiting for you No matter how many detours you take The way is always at your feet I love the idea of Jesus being the way Because if you imagine Jesus as the path under your feet There is another amazing eternal truth there That God is always with us Always beside us Jesus is even named Emmanuel Which means God with us And I think God with us Is one of the most exciting aspects Of God being born into human flesh And making life with us I mean when we talk about Having an all-powerful God So there must have been a thousand, thousand ways

That God could have redeemed the world And how amazing is it that God chose the way That meant becoming one of us Making life with us Eating us Eating with us, not eating us That would be a different New Testament What an extraordinary and intimate relationship To have with this vast cosmic being And even when we killed Jesus Jesus returned not just in the resurrection But promised to come again Making the world new And bringing heaven to earth What extraordinary love That cannot be overcome by death Or pain or hate I think this is really well summed up In the Song of Songs Where it says For love is as strong as death It is as unrelenting as flames It sparks our fiery flames The fiercest blaze of all Many waters cannot quench love Rivers cannot sweep it away If man were to give all of the wealth Of his house for love His offer would be utterly scorned

And Jesus as God with us Embodies this love with us Love for us in our lives today So when we talk about Jesus the way What can we take from that?

[13 : 15] So I think first It's a journey You're not expected to get everywhere Anytime If God's path is always at everyone's feet Then as a church How broad and open must our welcome be?

Because God can call people at any point in their life We may not look at them and think Those are the kind of people that come to church Or those are the kind of people we normally meet at church But they are always welcome Because God has always welcomed them I also think when we think about The path being always with us God being always with us I think that's a huge calling for us to be like God In journeying together In walking alongside people Through the ups and downs I think one of my friends when I was talking about becoming a priest said The thing about being a priest is that The main job is To go with people all the way to hell And sit with them there If that's where they go And then come back But we believe in this church in a priesthood of all believers So we are all called to go with people All the way to hell if that's where they're going And sit with them and be with them there So let's turn to Jesus' next big promise

Because Jesus doesn't just promise to be the eternal way that we cannot lose The way that is always at our feet Jesus also says, I am the truth Now I understand a part of this to mean that God sees into our souls And sees exactly who we are All the thoughts that we might be prouder of And the thoughts we might be less proud of And God loves us The truth of us Whatever that truth is Because God has made the truest part of all of us So however much we may worry about what's inside of us Who we really are What we are Worry about being vulnerable or honest with others Worry about what people would think if we actually tried to be our truest self God made us all exactly as we are And God only makes masterpieces So that truth must be good enough And I believe that following the way Living your life as best as you can Ultimately leads to each and every one of us

Becoming the truest version of ourselves And living that out as best we can I think there are lots of practical implications for that The first is Don't be embarrassed about what's inside of you It's always good enough You can live that honestly If you're struggling with things It's okay to struggle with them in public Because we're all struggling And it makes us easier for people who are struggling If they see other people struggling And I think perhaps now in this particular phase of life There is one particular thing I'd like you to take away Which is at the moment Certainly as a church We have quite a lot of help available So if you're struggling Please do come forward and talk to us If we're living our truth together as a community Then that means everyone being able to step forward And ask for help when they need it And ultimately Jesus promises I am the life God promises to bring us all into life

In its most abundant form I know there are sometimes people who suggest that Living a Christian life might mean sacrificing some easy joys I mean St. Augustine famously said Lord make me holy just not yet I think he actually meant Lord make me chaste just not yet But that was more detailed But I wouldn't be standing in front of you Doing the job I am doing If I didn't believe passionately That the Christian life is actually more joyful More loving and more purposeful Than any of the alternatives out there Yes it might mean less of the easy hits that numb the senses And make the moment better at the expense of how you feel afterwards And I'd count possessions and wealth among those easy hits Because stuff is never satisfying in the long run But true joy for me is found in living out your truth In knowing deeply that you are loved and lovable just as you are And in handing over the illusion that you can completely control your life

[17 : 40] More than anything I am certain that God longs people into freedom, peace and joy So one of the things I do each week is I go and do some chaplaincy at the local Pathway Women's Refuge And in that place it's quite an extraordinarily thin place Because I can feel God romping in the corridors Rejoicing in each and every single person Who moves to a better place of freedom and peace And sometimes, sometimes there's something quite extraordinary Which is in the middle of conversation God shows me people just as God sees them So just the other day I was talking to a woman who was Still in pieces about the history of abuse she'd suffered And God showed her to me And that she'd been hurt But like a dry field covered in a sparkling dawn dew She'd covered herself in kindness I could feel God rejoicing saying Look, this is one of my greatest creations Even though the world has hurt her in ways that are unbearable

And which I could feel made God rage The kindness she decorates herself shines out in her life None of the jewels in the world will ever sparkle Like she is sparkling now So let's pray Let's pray Loving God, we thank you that you are the way at our feet That you are always there That we can always turn to you We thank you that you chose to live your life with us That you walk each day with us And that you are the path So we see you in everything We thank you for shining the light of your truth upon us We thank you that you look into our souls And you see our truth And you see the truth that you made And that is good enough Please help us to live that truth out Because it isn't always easy in practice And ultimately, loving God We thank you for leading us into life In its most abundant form Amen