

## **Sermons at All Saints Anglican Church, Luxembourg**

**Lent 2026: When I survey the wondrous cross - reflections on the cross from John's gospel**

**Sermon 1: the cross promises life**

**Preached by Rev Canon Geoff Read on Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2026**

**Bible text: John 3: 1-6, 11-18**

Back in the early 1990s we moved from a church where I was curate to the church where I was vicar. It was a small church on a social housing estate in SE England. People there were wonderful, resilient, but often struggled with multiple challenges - social, educational, economic, relational and spiritual. Many people could read but chose not to and there was generational and systemic issue around literacy, crime and poverty.

It was here that I really began to learn about what Jesus meant when he was asked about his purpose in life

He answered: I have come that they may have life, life in all its fullness

Two people, in particular, helped me with this: Doris and another lady whose name I can't remember, but let's call her Sally



Doris was the matriarch of a large family of three or four generations on the estate - her passion was to care and serve and to knit

But as the years rolled on into her eighties, she began to experience swelling in her fingers so that cooking and caring and knitting became harder and harder

On Fridays I would visit Doris and we would talk about where God was in all of this - and particular we would talk about the promise Jesus made recorded by John in his gospel: I have come that they may have life, life in all its fullness - what on earth could that fullness of life look like for Doris as it felt that her horizons were shrinking as her arthritis made it harder and more painful to knit let alone care for her family

Sally and her family had moved to the estate and started coming to St Clare's church with two of their own children and a daughter they had adopted. This little girl had Downs syndrome - the struggles they had were not with her. But the huge struggle they had with the system to get schooling and social support suitable for her. I remember Sally asking: so, what does life in all its fullness look like for us and for her?

And that question has stayed with me throughout the next thirty years of ministry: Jesus, what do you mean when you promise life in all its fullness?

This Lent I want to invite you to join me in asking that question and especially focusing it on what Jesus said and did, focusing on his dying on the cross and rising as told by John in his gospel

We are going to, as it says in the old hymn of Isaac Watts “**survey** the wondrous cross on which the prince of glory died”. “Survey” is a strange word, one from the C18 when Watts wrote. It means to look carefully and in a sustained way at something

In this case at the cross, with the help of John’s gospel



As we do this we are going to come across some important words and phrases that will recur in that gospel

One is “glory”, the unmistakable presence of God. And it is a word John doesn’t just use about God but also about us too. In prayer to his Father Jesus says: The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one (17:22)

Jesus will talk about fulness or abundance - huge water jars full of the best wine, feeding with so much bread that there is loads left over

We will come across a small but significant word: “As”

“As the Father loves me, so I love you” (Jn 15:9) and “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (Jn 20:21)

That somehow what is true of God and Jesus starts to become true about us too

Another word we will meet is “abide or remain” - we will be invited to enter into and abide or remain in the love between God the Father and Son and the Holy Spirit

And one of the most fundamental words Jesus uses is “life or eternal life”

And Jesus, in John’s gospel, uses all of these words to help us understand the cross

For Christians believe the cross is not some terrible accident or failure but is somehow part of God’s loving and life-giving purposes

## READING

John’s gospel feels very different from the other three, the synoptics. The style feels much more poetic, it is less linear and more circling around Jesus’ teaching. There are fewer encounters, but the ones we do find there are explored much more deeply than in the other gospels. There also seem to be familiar incidents missing - no story of his birth, at the last supper Jesus washes feet rather than breaks bread. In fact the same truths are there, but told from a new angle

So, let’s start by briefly considering one of these encounters as we look at how the cross promises life

Its one of the first, with a Jewish teacher called Nicodemus who is on the one hand fascinated by Jesus, but on the other fearful of what others may think of him - so he comes by night

As he comes with his spoken questions, Jesus sees his deeper questions and starts to talk about life

He uses the image of birth - the amazing mystery by which life is manifested, a baby moves from the inside to the outside, and the contrast could not be greater - from darkness to light, from safety to vulnerability, from dependence to interdependence, from preparation into the life he or she is intended for

How can a person be born again, Nicodemus asks: how can someone be born after having grown old! (v4)

Jesus shifts the focus and opens up his meaning of what life is about: What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. (v6)

Shift to v16 and this is what that being born in the fullest sense, what life in this fullest sense is about:

'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

In one short sentence we are presented with the essence of the good news Jesus brings

"God so loved" - here is the very heart of who God is, what He is: love

And it's a love that gives in such a costly way

the focus of that love is "the world" - a term used in different ways by John, but here meaning the whole cosmos - not just human beings, but all animate and inanimate objects, all that we see, touch, smell, taste matters to God and is the object of his love

but there is a particular love, a particular vocation for human beings, the "everyone" of this verse

Our destiny is not to perish but to live. Eternal life is less about quantity and more about quality - to wake up to the way that we are so deeply loved by God, and to step into a relationship of love with God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit

How? - by what Jesus calls believing - a word that isn't just about mental assent, intellectual agreement, so maybe we'd better translate it "trusting"

If you go to the end of John's gospel, to chapter 20:31, John writes about why he has recorded these things in his gospel

"But these (things) are written so that you may continue to trust that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through trusting you may have life in his name."

There is that word believing, trusting again, along with "life"

And somehow, at the heart of this amazing invitation to life, is the cross

Right here at the beginning of his ministry, in chapter 3:14, Jesus speaks about being "lifted up"

"And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up ..."

He's using an incident from the OT story of the Jews, when during their desert wanderings as a result of their disobedience to God, their looking away from Him, they are attacked by an epidemic of poisonous snakes



Moses is commanded by God to make a bronze replica of the snakes and hold it up on a pole

People must choose to look at the bronze snake, and when they do, they are cured

They must believe in this trusting way, turn back and look, stake their life and their futures, their everything on this strange way that God chooses to offer them life

Later in John 12:32 Jesus will talk again about how when he is lifted up - on the cross - he will draw all people to himself and somehow in that, his cross and resurrection will offer them life

Back in the OT wanderings that life was offered in the midst of the ongoing challenges of the desert - they had another 40 years of it!

As Nicodemus comes at night, he will experience the offer of life in the midst of the politics and intrigue of being part of a group of religious leaders, many of whom begin to hate Jesus and plot his arrest and death - see John 19 when after three years of being a secret disciple he breaks cover and comes to ask for the body of Jesus

And this is the thing: this life Jesus offers isn't magic. It is experienced in the midst of the struggles of finding education for a daughter with Downs syndrome and as your hands become arthritic and prevent you from knitting

Which is not surprising, because it is offered to us from the strangely ambiguous place of the cross - the place of execution and death that becomes the source of new birth and life

To discover this mystery for ourselves needs God's initiative to enable us to be, as Jesus puts it, "born of the Spirit" (3:6)

Our part is simply to desire, to want that so that God can enable us to believe, trust and wake up to life in all its fulness in the midst of those places and times in our lives that can seem the opposite of life, and in all that is going on in history right now that seems to be so life denying

Which is why Isaac Watts in his hymn urges us to "**survey** the wondrous cross" - to focus, and seek God's help, His grace, to see and experience afresh and anew all that the cross of Jesus offers to us and to our world.

