

We all need space to discern meaning and purpose for our lives. Matthew 24:36-44

A few years ago the SMH ran a series of feature articles where well known people were invited to ponder the question, 'if I had one year to live how would I spend it?' One objective of the column was to give some insight into the personality of the person being interviewed, but primarily to discern what the person's philosophy for life was, what was important for them, and what gave meaning to their lives. The assumption is that if we only have one year to live we would not wish to waste a moment and so would focus on those things that give meaning and purpose to our lives.

(It is interesting to note George Harrison, a member of the Beatles, the famous pop group from the sixties, the time of my youth, in this context was quoted as saying "*Everything else can wait but the search for God cannot wait, and love one another.*") Now there is a statement to ponder on the first Sunday in Advent.

I was reminded of this question 'if I had one year to live' by this morning's Gospel where Jesus draws on the story of Noah's ark from the book of Genesis in the Hebrew scriptures, even better known to Jesus' listeners then as it is now. However there is a subtle difference in the way Jesus retells the story from the way it is recorded in Genesis. In the ancient mythology of Genesis the justification for the great Flood was the extreme wickedness of the times and the earth's inhabitants, almost as if God needed to start all over again.

But in Jesus' retelling of the story one biblical commentator, Francis Beare observes, "there is no such insistence on the wickedness of those who are being swept away in the flood, but only on the lack of preparedness, their absorption in the daily round of living." In Jesus' retelling the emphasis moves from judgement to the importance of searching for what really matters in life, discerning what is important to us, like a feature writer inviting a prominent person to ponder the question 'if I had one year to live how would I spend it?'

At the commencement of worship this morning we shared in a prayer of confession which sought to express this need we have to find space within the busy routines of daily living in order to discern what really matters to us in life. The prayer began: *Eternal God, we come in this season of Advent seeking, hoping, wanting to hear your word. We come impelled by desires to deep for words, with longings too infinite to express. We come yearning for meaning in our existence and purpose for our lives.*

Indeed the season of Advent heightens this sense of searching after meaning with its emphasis on alertness and wakefulness, of watching and waiting for that which really matters in life. And so, Sunday by Sunday, we come to church. We take time out from the busy round and routines of daily living because we realise those activities in themselves – important as they may appear at the time – are not the reason for our existence, but instead the context in which we seek to express the true meaning and purpose for our lives. There are many things which bring some satisfaction, pleasure and even a degree of fulfillment to our lives but do not of themselves answer those ultimate questions, 'who am I?', 'why am I here?', and 'where is meaning to be found?'

Each of us at some point in our lives, or indeed many times in our lives, will ponder those questions, and each of us will find our own response to those questions, though most unlikely with complete certainty or clarity.

Just this week I and others from our congregation attended a lecture by social commentator Hugh Mackay in which he sought to defuse the apparent belief in society that we can 'manufacture' our own happiness by focussing on our own needs and aspirations. He warned against the apparent willingness of many people to sacrifice others on the altar of their personal desires and ambitions. In contrast Mackay suggests meaning and purpose is not found in wealth, status, career success or being permanently happy, but the quality of our

relationships, a selfless willingness to connect with others in the joys and challenges of life where we are able to look beyond our own needs to the needs of others.

Hugh Mackay's insights are helpful, but ultimately each of us needs to ponder and answer those existential questions for ourselves.

And so all I can offer you this morning is my own reflection on these questions and share how I have found meaning and purpose for my own existence through a deep belief I/we all come and go within a larger mystery that holds us to life and one another; an awareness of a deeper reality beyond myself that calls me forward and out of myself toward life and others; that my life and all life has meaning because it has been loved into being by a deeper reality that calls us into relationship with one another, with all creation and the source of life itself.

I, like us all, am still on that journey of faith seeking understanding, but dare to believe that life, healing and hope can be found for ourselves and our world in the Gospel of Jesus Christ our Lord.

And so we enter the Advent season which awakens within the human spirit an openness and desire for truth; which lifts the human spirit out of its preoccupation with the endless search for happiness in order to discern in the mystery of a child born in a stable, an awareness that our ordinary lives are touched by the divine; a deeper reality and dimension for living and understanding that gives purpose and meaning to our lives and relationships. Amen