

**Dare to be Different 3 – A life or a lifestyle?**

**A Sermon preached in St Mary's Walton-on-Thames on Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> June 2010**

**Readings: Romans 12. 9-21; John 10. 7-16**

“Get a life!” Not the nicest of expressions; in fact, it’s not been around all that long; and is normally used of someone who’s just a bit obsessed with things that really aren’t all that important, or maybe just needs to get out more. Get a life! Looking round at 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain, however, I’m surprised that “Get a life” hasn’t already morphed into “Get a lifestyle”.

Lifestyle is everywhere. To give only one indicator from the media: Channel 4 reckons to have 39 lifestyle programmes, on subjects like food, health, houses, holidays, fashion, and a surprising number that seem to be encouraging the male of the species to swap wives. There are lifestyle gurus and lifestyle magazines. We can have a healthy or an unhealthy lifestyle; a sedentary or an active lifestyle; a bohemian lifestyle; a nomadic lifestyle; a parasitic lifestyle; a subsistence lifestyle; Wikipedia lists a further 91, many of which you really don’t want to know about. I even came across a website where someone had written in to ask: “is this a good lifestyle for my two fish?”

Lifestyle is everywhere. Living in affluent Surrey, lifestyle may include: driving the children to swimming, football, rugby, tennis, scouts, guides, or whatever; having a certain number of holidays or weekends away; going to a weekly Pilates, Jazzercise, aerobics, power cycling class; going to the gym; meeting friends for coffee, lunch, dinner, a pint; visiting family who are at a distance; going to the theatre, cinema, concert, opera, ballet; an active social life; making time for hobbies, leisure activities, playing tennis, squash, football, bridge, chess; and more besides. Lifestyle is ingrained in our culture.

Last week we were thinking about how we are shaped (often subconsciously) by the culture in which we live, and how important it is that we dare to be different, and build a Kingdom of God culture in the church family. This week, I want to suggest that one of the greatest dangers facing Christians in the West is that we carry over a lifestyle culture into the life of the Church; so that our faith, and the

practice of our faith, is seen as a lifestyle choice; as one choice among many, one component part in the lifestyle that we've chosen for ourselves; a kind of Christian consumerism, if you like, with church as something we fit in around everything else.

Before going any further, I want to make one thing abundantly clear: I'm not judging anyone, nor am I wanting to condemn anyone; not least because I reminded the congregation last week that Jesus clearly taught us not to judge, nor to condemn. Nor am I suggesting that there's anything intrinsically wrong with any of the things I've just listed.

What I am trying to help us see is that Jesus didn't come so we could have a lifestyle; or even so we could have a better lifestyle, a more meaningful, sustaining or rewarding lifestyle than we would have had without him. Jesus came to give us life.

John 10.10: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (or, in the translation I grew up with, "life in all its fulness"). Jesus knew a thing or two about life. He was around when human life came into being. He was involved in creating the blueprint for what human life was meant to be; and having carried the sin of this broken world on the cross, he's fully aware of everything that diminishes, destroys and undermines that life in us. He said of himself, "I am the life" (John 14.6). Later in this chapter, in John 10.15, Jesus goes on to say that he is laying down his life for the sheep; in other words, Jesus lays down his life, that this abundant life could be our life.

That is the choice, from which all other life-choices flow; down that route is "seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you as well". To start from the other end, with an already-existing pattern of choices, and then see where we can fit in the 'God bit' – that's a lifestyle. It leaves our lives essentially the same, but for a bit of Christian seasoning on top.

Let me put it another way [*at this point I held up two objects, one a piece of veneer-covered chipboard, part of an IKEA flat-pack unit, and the other a wooden carving of Dürer's 'Praying Hands'*]: this is veneer; and this is real wood. Now, there's nothing wrong with the veneer; many of us will have built bookcases, wardrobes, bedside tables, or in this case a CD tower, with veneer. But veneer is a surface thing; it's a thin layer on top, covering up what's underneath; you can't do anything with veneer,

other than keep the dust off it; and if the veneer gets chipped or cracked, then we see through to the chipboard.

This, on the other hand, is real wood. It's wood all the way through. If it gets chipped or scratched, it's still wood underneath, so we can sand it down and restore it; the grain of the wood is still there. This piece of wood is real. It has texture; it has 'feel'. Wood can be shaped; it can be transformed into a thing of beauty.

The abundant life that Jesus came to bring us is as different from any lifestyle as real wood is from the veneer. It's the difference between having the black-and-white reproduction in a book, and seeing the original Rembrandt, or Monet, or Picasso in front of us.

It's not even as if being a Christian means having to become something else: following Jesus, accepting God's gift of life, involves becoming more truly the person we were always meant to be. Nor is this just a matter of our choosing: remember Jesus said "You did not choose me, but I chose you, and appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last." (Jn 15.16) Our choice is whether or not to respond.

It is a real choice, just as it was for some who met Jesus. And there is a cost to making this choice. Not everyone in the gospels who heard Jesus chose to follow him; for some the cost was just too high. There is a cost to being a Christian: and it begins with giving the control of our lives over to God. Listen to the first two verses of Romans 12: ***I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of our minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God ...***

Paul doesn't begin with lessons in how to live. He begins by encouraging his Roman brothers and sisters to give themselves to God. Only then does he go on to say: ***do not be conformed any longer to this world.*** There is a cost to being transformed by the Holy Spirit; there can be a cost in living out Paul's teaching from our epistle today (please take the reading sheet home, and spend time with it this

week). There is a cost in praying “not my will, but yours be done”; there is a cost in praying, as we shall do in a few moments, “your will be done, in heaven and earth”; there is a cost in accepting that we will no longer be able to do exactly what we want. These are not lifestyle choices: they’re far too counter-cultural ever to be lifestyle choices. No, these are life choices, that flow from the fundamental life choice: to follow Christ, to love God, and be loved by him. Is it worth it? Absolutely, every time.

Being a Christian isn’t part of a lifestyle. It’s a life. It’s a complete package. We don’t need to “Get a life!” We’re invited to receive a life, the life that Jesus promised, the most joyful and transforming of gifts – the gift of God is the gift of his life. Unless, that is, we’re happy with the veneer.

Jesus said: “I came that they may have life, life in all its fullness”.

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