



## Life in Abundance

4 February 2024

Canon Robert Mackley

*Genesis 2: 4b–25    Luke 8: 22–35*

‘The Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.’

*In nomine...*

Are you living your best life? It’s a marvellous phrase that, #livingmybestlife; it always makes me smile when I hear it. But are you? Well, singing Palestrina’s canticles for eight voices is pretty ‘best’; being at Trinity College Cambridge, there’s a lot of ‘best’ in that too, isn’t there? So perhaps you are? But the question is, how do you know? Are you missing out?

For living your best life suggests that there are a variety of lives available to you and you just need to pick one. Like going into a clothes shop and seeing a variety of outfits on hangers and choosing which one you like most, the most ‘Instagrammable’, perhaps. And you take it off the peg, put it on and off you go. Your best life, oven-ready to live.

Except there are a few problems with that idea. The first is the idea that me and my life can be separated like that, that I can just choose my life as if it is something other than me which I can control and fashion for myself. And yet a moment’s thought tells us this can’t be true; I can never separate myself from myself or step away and be objective about me, because what steps away is me!

It’s not that there aren’t choices we can make, of course there are, it’s just that I can’t be apart from them, and that lots of them have already been made, some of them before I was born.

Which brings us to the second and related problem, which is I can’t just do whatever I want. There was a song doing the rounds a few years ago – I don’t know if it’s still popular – called *Believe* by someone named Lin Marsh. The chorus of the song went like this:

I can do anything at all, I can climb the highest mountain,  
I can feel the ocean calling wild and free.  
I can be anything I want, with this hope to drive me onward,  
If I can just believe in me.

Now, I know what you’re thinking: who needs the *Hymn to the Creator of Light* when you’ve got Lin Marsh’s profound metaphysical lyrics? But it’s no joke. It’s what you’re told: just believe in yourself and anything is possible.

Now we're often told this for all sorts of well-meaning reasons to encourage and inspire us, and if it's about working hard then I'm sure that's good thing. It is Lent Term after all.

Speaking for myself, however, I think it fair to say that no matter how much I believe in myself I will never be a professional footballer, a ballet dancer, a jet pilot or a professional singer. I've got two left feet, I'm not a massive fan of heights and I can't hold a note terribly well. I'm afraid I can't be anything I want if I can just believe in me. It's a bit of a lie.

But it is a powerful lie, a popular lie and the lie so often behind the idea of living my best life: that I have an infinite number of choices and I just need to pick and then believe.

But one of the reasons why anxiety and mental health troubles are off the scale these days is precisely because of this, because we are demanding far, far too much from people. We're telling people they must completely invent their whole lives and identities. It's cloaked in the language of choice, of freedom, it's made to look like a wonderful progressive thing. But it isn't. In practice it's a crushing burden.

It's a crushing burden because where on earth do we start? I've only got one life and I need to do all these millions of things to make sure I'm not missing out. It's exhausting just thinking about that, never mind doing it. It's a crushing burden because it fundamentally misunderstands what it means to be human and asks of us self-knowledge and a capacity to do and transform ourselves that we simply don't have. It's a crushing burden because it's hard enough work just living, never mind worrying about whether I'm living the right option.

Now my dad recalls being at school and going to see the careers teacher. You told him what you liked doing and what O-levels you were studying and then – regardless of what you'd just told him – he told you you should go and work for Pilkington Glass. It wasn't a good school, the children weren't very bright and the teacher saw his task as just getting the kids some gainful employment.

So yes, it's fair to say that in the past we perhaps veered too much the other way. There were no choices, you followed your dad (usually your dad) into a career and you kept in your social and economic class. This was not good and if Lin Marsh and *Believe* and living your best life is a reaction to all that then frankly that's entirely understandable.

But it's still wrong; wrong and damaging.

And the Christian faith says something rather different. For a start, as our reading from the Book of Genesis tonight reminds us, it tells us that we are created. We do not create ourselves. And what a relief that is. It means I am not totally responsible for my life, which also means I am not totally responsible for my failures. My life is a gift to me which in many ways comes with plenty of choices already made; not just that I won't be a footballer, but also all sorts of other character traits, strengths and weaknesses that guide what I might do and how I might live.

Genesis tells us 'The Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground'. God has been using the green and environmental movements of recent decades to teach us that afresh: that we are animals, created from the earth and while we have stewardship of the earth, responsibility for it – hence Genesis speaking of our naming all the creatures – we are not set far above it just able to do whatever we want at will. There are constraints, and our refusal to recognise them – in our trashing of the planet or indifference to the value of human life – have the terrible consequences that we see all around us. We need to have some humility, a word that comes from humus, meaning ground or earth. We need to be earthed.

'The Lord God,' our first reading told us, 'took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it.' In other words, he has given us a job to do, he has given us a vocation, a calling. We don't need to make it up ourselves. And because it comes from God, our creator, following it will make us happy. Now we might imagine that vocations are things that doctor and teachers – and, yes, even priests – have. And so we do. But in fact we all have a vocation from God. In fact we all have several vocations. The first is the most important: the vocation to be. You are willed, necessary, loved and wanted just as you are. God will not love you any more with a first, a billion pounds, or as a human rights lawyer than he does right now. You can relax, the worst you think you know about yourself God already knows, knows better than you, and he still loves you. As Genesis puts it: you are naked and need not be ashamed.

And our other vocations come from this and are about what to do with this gift of our lives, about finding and opening what we might call our 'sealed orders' from God. And God has already given us some hints and guidance in our natural talents and gifts, in accepting who we are and where we find ourselves. Ask yourself what you enjoy, what you're good at, what gives you peace and joy and you won't be very far away from finding your vocation.

To live our best life, then, is to live the life God has given us. Yes, that will involve choices and decisions, plenty of them, but our true freedom, our true happiness is to find the vocation already hidden in our hearts, not to have to anxiously make it up ourselves, not knowing if we're right and what we're missing out on. It is, paradoxically, in accepting that we are creatures that we are most free and so will truly find life in abundance.