

## Sunday after Ascension 2022: St Thomas-on-The Bourne (20.05.2022)

It is 9.15 in the evening of March 9<sup>th</sup>, 1891. George Sturt is in his room, and having dipped his pen into the inkwell on his table, he begins his journal entry for that day. He writes: 'Happiness however obtained is not life but is only a pass time and way of getting through life. Deep below it and all round it on every side (like the atmosphere amongst flowers), Life *is*. Friendship, Love, Art, Athletics, Science---all these, and the like of these, are partial; but Life is whole and complete. Tonight, I am neither happy nor unhappy, I merely am...What is it all for?...What are we waiting for? Pass the time until---what? Until we die? Is life the waiting-room of a railway station and Death the train that will bring us to our destination?'

Journals: p 64 .

Well. It is all a bit melancholic and home-spun, and although when George Sturt wrote that journal entry, he was twenty-eight years old, it has a touch of teenage angst lurking within it.

In fact, most of his journal entries are not like that at all: instead, there are detailed descriptions of the weather, and going for long walks, and rejoicing in the colours and shapes of clouds and worries about managing the Wheelwright's shop, when all he really wants to do is write.

But...what is clear from the passage I have just read, is that by pouring out his soul, even if it is only in a journal, he is trying to make sense of the purpose of his life. And although it is tinged with a kind of gauzy depression, it is honest. It is *his* writing, and no-one else's, and when he describes his walks, say through Farnham Park, we can follow him in our mind's eye. Then, in the piece I have just read, as the nib scratches along the paper, he comes up with a nice description involving trains and stations to help him think through what his own life might be about.

If you are new to the parish and haven't yet read his 'Change in the Village', give it a try. It's all about The Bourne and is a minor classic.

So that is George Sturt.

Now listen to another writer: this is a man called 'John' writing sometime in the last fifty years of the first century. He is describing a prayer of Jesus: *The glory that you have given to me I have given them, so that they may be one as we are one, I in them and you in me...*

John, or whoever the author might have been, is writing as though he was actually present as Jesus spoke the words of the prayer. But a moment's reflection will dispel that idea: can you really imagine Jesus praying aloud whilst John sits beside him grooving words with a stylus onto a wax tablet like a secretary using shorthand to record the precise saying?

But if John was not present, then we have to read the passage not as the recorded words of Jesus himself, but as the words of Jesus as John imagined them...

And then, having realised this, we might want to go a stage further, and apart from being astonished that someone would have the chutzpah to pretend that he knew what Jesus said, we might want to ask what kind of literature this is. It was easy with George Sturt: he was writing a journal in a particular, well-honed, and well-respected way. Anyone reading it can recognise it as a journal, it fits into a genre. Whereas 'John' seems to be writing a kind of meditation, a long, serene, discursive piece...in which he tries to imagine what Jesus might have said if he, the author, had ever been able to overhear one of his prayers.

It's quite a bravura piece of writing when you think about it. It takes audacity to write as though you were there and knew intimately what Jesus was saying and thinking...when in reality you were not there at all.....

But I venture to suggest that although at first sight the gap between George Sturt and John might seem huge...the one honest, down-to-earth, local, the other almost deliberately deceiving the reader into thinking that what is written were the exact words of Jesus, what they have in common is this: both George Sturt and John are trying to find ways of exploring what they believe to be the underlying truths about human life. In George Sturt's case he wonders if Life with a capital 'L' has any meaning at all, and John is wondering whether the life, death and resurrection of Jesus are the keys to understanding human purpose and destiny. The one uses a journal for his exploration, the other uses a meditational method...but both are aiming in the same general direction. Is life purposeful or not? Yet John adds through his meditation the possibility, no more than that, that somehow the meaning of things is to be found in the glory of a particular human being, a human being who transcended the normal limits of human understanding...

For me, this is the crucial question we all have to face, not just once in our lives but frequently throughout our lives: is Jesus the one who reveals the purpose of life, who points us towards our ultimate destiny with God, or, as we struggle to understand our human purpose, should we ignore him, and like George Sturt, draw only on our human experience as our guide?

Like you, I have made my choice, and I continue to make it daily, because it's the only way I can make sense of my life and the life of our world.

So, because we are all in this quest together, I rejoice in your lovely company, and I rejoice in the gifts of meaning revealed through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is my Lord and my God, and your Lord and your God...

**The Rt Revd Dr Christopher Herbert.**