

## Jesus, Frankl and the meaning of our lives...

25/12/17

**I speak in the name of Jesus the Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.**

*"We who were saved, the minority of our transport, found out the truth in the evening. I inquired from prisoners who had been there for some time where my colleague and friend P\_\_\_ had been sent.*

*'Was he sent to the left side?'*

*'Yes,' I replied.*

*'Then you can see him there.' I was told.*

*'Where?'*

*A hand pointed to the chimney a few hundred yards off, which was sending a column of flame up into the great sky of Poland. It dissolved into a sinister cloud of smoke.*

*'That's where your friend is, floating up to Heaven,' was the answer. But I still did not understand until the truth was explained to me in plain words."*

(A quote taken from the book entitled **Man's Search for Meaning** by Viktor E. Frankl. P 26:2004)

Who are we?

How do we give meaning to our lives?

What does Christmas really mean to us?

After I completed my National Service in 1990, I was unsure in what direction to take in terms of my career. I had completed my Divinity degree at Rhodes University, but felt too young to enter the ministry. My father, at the time, directed his own advertising company. One of his senior account managers suggested that I apply to the OK/Hyperama Group who were about to open a new store at N1 City. I duly applied and was awarded with the title of Trainee Manager. This portfolio required that I spend time in every department of the

Hyperama store, from Receiving to Cash bank etc. After spending time in every department, learning with a “hands-on” approach, I was then given a thorough oral examination by the Unit Manager. If he was satisfied with my knowledge and skill level, I was allowed to pass onto the next section. The total training took place over a period of about two years...

The reason I am relating this experience to you is that come Christmas time, my eyes were opened anew with regards to what Christmas means in terms of retail. I was involved as a Trainee Manager in this retail group for two Christmas periods. Over Christmas, the Trainee Managers were given their own mini-department to manage and supervise. For my first Christmas, I was given the newly opened wine store. My second Christmas in retail saw me in charge of the toy department. I quickly learnt that Christmas in retail is not about Jesus. It is about reaching sales targets, profit margins, reducing shrinkage and making as much money as possible for the company...

I became so disillusioned that I handed in my resignation on Boxing Day after my second Christmas in retail...

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Today we read the classic Christmas story as related in the Gospel of Luke. This traditional story has given hope and joy to generations of Christians. Hope and meaning. Hope for a new beginning, a new start, for the birth of the Christ child represents a watershed moment for humankind.

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By corporately taking part in the acknowledgement and celebration of the birth of Jesus, we are not only focussing on a moment in history, we are also being reminded of how God expressed His ultimate love for us by creating the incarnation. This is a powerful reminder of God’s plan for the world and those

who wish to be saved. God cared enough for us to bring His Son into the world that we might have the option of eternal life.

Perhaps people need to be reminded about this over the Christmas season?

I have noted over the years that Christmas has increasingly become a strong focus for retail to use the opportunity to boost sales at the cost of the birth of our Saviour...

The questions remain:

Who are we?

***We are Christians who believe in the light and love of Jesus Christ.***

The second question, namely, "How do we give meaning to our lives?" remains a little more challenging and perhaps each of us will have a different answer to this question.

In answer to this question, I am reminded of a speech written by my Headmaster, Mr Graham Keats, for the College Academic Awards in December of this year. Graham quoted the Greek philosopher Aristotle, who said:

*"Happiness is the meaning and the purpose of life, the whole aim and end of human existence."*

For Aristotle, true happiness came from a life of meaning, of doing what is worth doing.

You may recall the quote from the book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, written by Viktor E. Frankl, that I read to you this morning. For those of you who are perhaps unfamiliar with this author, Viktor wrote extensively about his personal struggle for survival in Auschwitz and other Nazi concentration camps during WW 2. Viktor explains in his various books, the thinking that enabled him to survive in spite of tremendous odds. Viktor believes that there is more to our existence than meets the eye, he reveals his firm conviction that we are not glorified animals but repressed angels!

Viktor realised early on that humanity often lives in an existential vacuum where industrialised society is out to satisfy all human needs, and its companion, the consumer society. (Remember my experience in retail?)

Viktor Frankl suggests in his writings that there are three ways that humanity can find meaning in their lives:

- 1) Firstly, he suggests that we can find meaning in what we do, our actions, our deeds and what we create in and with our lives.
- 2) Secondly, he suggests that we can find meaning in experiencing something or encountering someone, in other words, meaning can be found not only in work, but also in love.
- 3) Thirdly, and Viktor lists this as the most important, when facing a fate we cannot change, we are called upon to make the best of it by rising above ourselves and growing beyond ourselves, in a word, by changing ourselves.

Let us, as Christians unpack these powerful words for a moment this Christmas morning and see how they can be applied to our lives in terms of giving our lives meaning...

Firstly, as Christians, we are called to make a difference in society, to be the Light of Christ and to spread the Gospel of Jesus. By using our God given gifts, whatever they may be, we are able to create love and allow the Holy Spirit to empower, not only ourselves, but also those whom we engage with. These actions impart a deep meaning to our lives.

Secondly, when we encounter love in Jesus and others, we are being lifted up into the truth of the Gospel. God is love. By being that friend, partner or significant other, we are making a real difference to that person. Christianity is ultimately about relationships and engaging with people, of all sorts. Yes, liturgy, worship and ritual is important, but they would be meaningless if we had no-one to share our spiritual journey with. If we are serious about our love for God, we need to keep our relationships with people a priority in our lives. Not always easy, but essential.

Thirdly, as Viktor reminds us, sometimes our lives do not always go the way we hoped they would, or the way we planned. Sometimes we even struggle, be it a broken relationship, loneliness, addiction, health or grief. This is when we, as

Christians, are especially called to rely upon the faith of our loving God to support us during these times of trial, so that we can indeed rise above the situation and grow through it. This is the most vital element of making meaning in our lives; it is, however, also the most challenging...

I am reminded of a quote written by a German bishop, Moser, who related the following true incident:

*“A few years after WW 2, a doctor examined a Jewish woman who wore a bracelet made of baby teeth mounted in gold. ‘A beautiful bracelet,’ the doctor remarked. ‘Yes,’ the woman answered, ‘this tooth here belonged to Miriam, this one to Esther, and this one to Samuel...’ She mentioned the names of her daughters and sons according to their age. ‘Nine children,’ she added, ‘and all of them were taken to the gas chambers.’ Shocked, the doctor asked: ‘How can you live with such a bracelet?’ Quietly, the Jewish woman replied, ‘I am now in charge of an orphanage in Israel.’*

You see, this woman made meaning out of her life experiences.

Who are we?

***We are Christians who believe in the light and love of Jesus Christ.***

How do we give meaning to our lives?

***We focus on our Christian actions and deeds***

***We focus on building relationships based on love***

***We use our faith in God to rise above our struggles in life and to grow closer to Him.***

What does Christmas really mean to us?

***Christmas is a time of joy and celebration as we, the Body of Christ, celebrate a very special child born unto us, and the world, in order to make a difference in our lives.***

So, in conclusion, I am reminded of a beautiful poem written by Howard Hunter, who says it all so beautifully...

*This Christmas end a quarrel.*

*Seek out a forgotten friend.*

*Dismiss suspicion and replace it with trust.*

*Write a letter.*

*Give a soft answer.*

*Encourage youth.*

*Manifest your loyalty in word and deed.*

*Keep a promise.*

*Forgo a grudge.*

*Forgive an enemy.*

*Apologise.*

*Try to understand.*

*Examine your demands on others.*

*Think first of someone else.*

*Be kind.*

*Be gentle.*

*Laugh a little more.*

*Express your gratitude.*

*Welcome a stranger.*

*Gladden the heart of a child.*

*Take pleasure in the beauty and wonder of the earth.*

*Speak your love, and then speak it again.*

In the words of the beautiful hymn:

*O come, all ye faithful*

*Joyful and triumphant*

*O come ye, o come ye to Bethlehem*

*Come and behold Him*

*Born the King of Angels*

May God Bless you and your family this Christmastide.

Amen.