

## 2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

### Changing our lives for the better

Presented by Margaret Hall

#### Introduction

A while back the front-page news in a well-known publication for motorists was headed *Twenty Cars That Could Change Your Life*. It's amazing to think a car could have that kind of power. But such a headline fits in with the sort of titles stocking the shelves of the self-improvement sections in our bookshops - with sub-titles like *How to Change Your Life in Seven Days*. They tap into the dissatisfactions we all feel from time to time with the way our lives are going - that wish that things were different - that we were different.

Over the last two or three decades the self-improvement, self-fulfillment movements have produced many courses and books and DVDs - and a good deal of revenue for their promoters. As helpful as some may have found them, it's also helpful to recognize that the increased focus on ourselves they can lead to does have some downsides. In working to gain what we think will enhance our lives we may be at risk of losing something far more important.

#### I

'Finders keepers, losers weepers,' we chanted as children, as we claimed for ourselves some object we'd found. It seemed fair enough. If someone had been careless enough to leave it lying around they didn't deserve to have it. And if we were lucky enough to find it, then good for us. We took easily to the notion that life was about getting what you could.

When we think now as adults of changing our lives for the better, we're tempted to think in similar terms - of what we can gain for ourselves. We think of what we'd like - more appreciation, more control, more freedom, more leisure, more money, more travel. A better car might do it. Even the very worthy goals of better health and more education can become so all-absorbing, they leave little time for things less focused on ourselves and our own advantage.

What we chanted as children, and may still in our heart of hearts believe, is very different from something Jesus said. It's completely different from the way he lived. What he said must have had quite an impact, because we find it in all four Gospels - six times altogether. It seems Jesus may have repeated it in different situations. It's about changing our lives for the better.

This is one of Matthew's versions of it:

*Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.*

Other translations say,

*Whoever finds their life will lose it. Whoever preserves their life will lose it. Whoever tries to keep their life will lose it.*

Jesus added:

*What good will it do if you gain the whole world, yet lose your very self? For what can you give in exchange for your soul?*

Jesus turned upside down what many of us normally think - that the business of life is self-preservation. By what Jesus said, our natural urge to centre on ourselves is actually working against us, rather than for us. But if we forget ourselves in humbly serving God by serving others, we'll gain what's worth having. If we lose our real selves - our souls - in pursuit of what cannot last, we'll have lost our most valuable possession, which nothing we can offer will bring back.

It's the difference between a safe and comfortable existence and really living. When Jesus said he came so we might have life, and have it to the full, he wasn't promising safety and comfort. He promised peace in the midst of turmoil and contentment in times of need. He gives strength in weakness, and a steadying sense of purpose in all the chaos.

Not long after Jesus left them, the persecution of his followers began, just as he'd said it would. No doubt many were tempted to save their lives by denouncing him. Those who did won for themselves a few more years in this life. But they lost the real life Jesus had died to give them.

## II

In Jesus' life, death and resurrection, he exemplified the truth he taught, that in losing our lives in the service of others we gain them. He knew he'd come to lose his life to gain a better life for us. In Paul's letter to the Christians in Philippi we have a summary of what Jesus voluntarily lost. Not considering his equality with God as something to keep grasping, he took on human likeness, and humbled himself to the point of death on a cross. In that unspeakably awful loss he won for us the chance to be saved from everything that destroys us. Having fought on behalf of others and won, he's now exalted to the highest place. He's been given the name above every name, and in God's good time every tongue will confess that the one who made himself nothing is now Lord of all.

Ever since Jesus, countless men and women have heeded his words, and followed his example. They've been permanently changed by discovering life isn't about how much we can get, but about how much we give. It's not about claiming our rights.

In his first letter to the church in Corinth Paul reminds us he had as much right as the other apostles, like Jesus' brothers and Peter, to have a wife. But he'd given up that right to spend his life travelling to spread the news about Jesus. He was convinced that news could save everyone who believed it from eternal separation from God, so he was ready to suffer a great deal in order to pass it on. He was hounded from town to town; he endured floggings, attempted stonings and repeated imprisonments; tradition tells us he suffered the death penalty in Rome.

Telemachus was a monk who sought closeness to God by living alone in the desert. But he came to see it as a selfish existence - that serving people was a better way. When he got to Rome he found that gladiators were still being killed in the arena for entertainment. Things had changed, in that the gladiators were captured soldiers rather than imprisoned Christians, but Telemachus was horrified to see such blood-lust in a so-called Christian city. Disregarding his own safety, he leapt into the arena to try to stop it, and was immediately felled by a sword. At the sight of his lifeless body the huge crowd fell silent.

Slowly and quietly they filed from the arena, and it was never again used for that purpose. In losing his own life for the honour of Christ, Telemachus gained for others a very big change for the better. In following his conscience he kept his soul.

Jim Elliot gave up the chance of a comfortable life lecturing in an American college, to take the gospel to unreached groups of people in the jungles of Central America. He died there at the hands of the Auca Indians. Many in that tribe later became Christians, justifying Jim's words, which echo Jesus' own: *They are no fools who give what they cannot keep to gain what they cannot lose.*

### III

Following Jesus' example of losing one's life in the humble service of others has an impact all the greater because it's *not* the norm.

A student in a Bible School in the Philippines became disturbed over the condition of the men's toilets, which seemed to get neglected in the cleaning routine. So he took matters into his own hands - he complained to the principal. A little while later the student noticed the problem was being fixed, but then he saw with amazement that the man with the mop and bucket was the principal! He was forced to ask himself why he hadn't thought of doing it, and he learned a lesson he never forgot about serving others. I'm reminded of the impact on me as a young student at a conference, seeing John Stott, the keynote speaker, renowned author and international preacher, standing in a long line of students, to wash his plate.

Admittedly it's difficult for us to serve God and others without seeking something for ourselves, even if it's just a degree of recognition. The self will intrude. We can and do serve others, but we find it hard to shake off our concern that we get the credit for it. Perhaps we'd do more than we do, and enjoy it more, if we could give up caring who gets the credit, and just be glad it's done.

Ruth Calkin expressed the way the self intrudes in this poem:

You know, Lord, how I serve you,  
                   with great emotional fervour, in the limelight.  
 You know how eagerly I speak for you at a meeting.  
 You know how I effervesce when I promote a fellowship group.  
 You know my genuine enthusiasm at a Bible study.

But how would I react, I wonder,  
                   if you pointed to a basin of water,  
 and asked me to wash the calloused feet  
                   of a bent and wrinkled old woman,  
                   day after day, month after month,  
                   in a room where nobody saw, and nobody knew.

As Jesus said, if we do our good deeds in order to be seen, the honour people will give us will be the *only* reward we'll get. But he also said that the good we do that's not seen by people *is* seen by God and will be rewarded by him.

All of us face situations which call upon us to deny ourselves what we'd prefer to meet the needs of others. Someone's described the choice of whether to protect ourselves or give of ourselves as being all about basins. We can either take a basin in order to wash our hands, as Pontius Pilate did. Or we can take a basin in order to wash others' feet, as Jesus did.

Certainly Jesus consistently put aside his own needs. He gave up the chance to rest to teach the crowds the truth they thirsted for. He had no home of his own - in his words, 'nowhere to lay his head.' He could describe himself as humble and gentle without fear of contradiction. He saw himself as the servant Isaiah had written about some centuries before, who allowed himself to be despised and afflicted - like a lamb led to the slaughter.

## **Conclusion**

Jesus gave us the surest way of changing our lives for the better - finding our true and better selves in helping others and honouring God. If our sole aim is to make our lives as secure and trouble-free and comfortable as possible, we lose what's real and lasting. In using God's gifts of time and energy in ways that reveal his love, we find the peace and satisfaction we're searching for. The choice is ours - to hoard life for ourselves, or spend it following Jesus.

*God of all truth and grace, teach us to serve you as you deserve - to give of ourselves and not to count the cost, to fight against our selfish selves and not to heed the wounds, to toil to meet the real needs of others and not to seek for rest, to labour cheerfully and to ask for no reward, except that of knowing we're doing your will, following in the footsteps of Jesus - through the strength the Holy Spirit supplies and for the praise of your holy name. Amen.*