



Bishop's Reflection

AT PLAY IN THE CREATOR'S FIELDS

BY THE RT. REV. PAUL-GORDON CHANDLER

Many of us hope the summer season will be a time of rest, refreshment and hopefully renewal. Some go to cabins in the woods, others to condos on the beach, while others visit family. As followers of Christ, we are reminded of his words that “anyone who believes in him... will have eternal life,” meaning life divine, experiencing life to the fullest. Perhaps more than anything else, God is all about giving life, continually breathing new life into us.

One of the most memorable summers for our family, when our children were still quite young, was going on safari in Kenya. I recall one morning being in the awe-inspiring wilderness savannah

of the Maasai Mara in the southwest of the country, surrounded by the world's most spectacular animals. I felt I was standing in the middle of God's playground. A gentle wind was blowing, and sights, sounds and smells enchanted me. I realized I was doing something I had not done for a long time; I was truly celebrating the gift of life.

Years ago, I recall seeing a film titled *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*, first released in 1991, which was based on the 1965 novel by Peter Matthiessen by the same title. While the film wasn't actually about celebrating life, I felt the title said so very much. Celebrating life is not something we in the West

are necessarily known for, as ours is a hurried culture - pressured, busy, and often stress oriented. We are always on the go. “Don't stop until you drop” is a motto for much of our culture. Words like burnout, exhaustion, breakdown, fatigue, anxiety, and crisis are familiar to us. How many times have we said, or heard others say, “I am just living for vacation?”

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Maasai Mara, Kenya

Karl Barth, the renowned 20th century Swiss theologian, once asked rhetorically in a sermon, “What is wisdom?” His answer was, “It is to know the art of living.” It is so easy to live such rushed and busy lives, that the gift of life itself just passes us by. When was the last time we stopped to simply find figures in the clouds, and were captivated with God’s creation?

Yet, living God’s gift of life to the fullest, means allowing time for relishing the present moment - time for laughter and play. It can be interesting to think about our most vivid childhood memories. Often they are associated with play in one form or another. For children, play comes naturally. However, as we grow up it is possible to forget how to play - to truly play - not for competition, or to improve our accuracy, serve or swing. Repeatedly, Jesus said that we need to become like children to enter and experience the Kingdom of God.

Perhaps the most celebrative country I have ever visited is Cuba. Every visit, I came away with a renewed zeal for living. Ironically, I was hosted by local church leaders that had experienced profound suffering - such as poverty, oppression and even violence. Yet, they possessed the admirable quality of



Roel Caboverde Yacer, *Untitled* (Cuban artist)



Karl Barth (1886 - 1968)

celebrating life in all its manifestations - joy and sorrow, pain and healing, despair and hope. Their celebratory disposition can be seen through the vitality in their worship. They are certainly much more interested in celebrating their experience of God’s gift of life than theologizing about it.

Their art confirms this perspective on life. Known for bright colors, contemporary Cuban art is expressive, catching the viewer’s attention via emotions. The work of award-winning Cuban artist Roel Caboverde Yacer, illustrates this powerfully.

I love the beginning of what is called the Westminster Shorter Catechism, written in 1647; “Our chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy [God] forever.” Certainly, this theme of celebrating life is seen throughout the Scriptures. Right from the beginning in the Genesis account of creation, we are told that God worked and then rested - meaning God enjoyed and relished creation. Perhaps no single book in the New Testament

focuses more of the theme of life than the Gospel of John. John begins his Gospel with an emphasis on life, by writing of Jesus, “In him was life, and that life was the light of humanity.” At the very end of his Gospel, he writes that his purpose in writing was that “by believing in Jesus we may have life in his name.” Throughout John’s Gospel we see the word “life” continually on Jesus’s lips - some 45 times: i.e. “I am the bread of life,” “The Spirit gives life,” “Whoever believes in me, streams of living water will flow from within them,” “I have come that you may have life to the full... that your joy may be complete,” “I am the resurrection and the life,” and on and on. John is attempting to communicate that in following Jesus we can experience the difference between existence and truly living.

John presents Jesus as a balanced person, who took time to be by himself, had a good sense of humor, and did not run through life, but rather refused to be rushed. He had time for people. He enjoyed wedding

parties. He is certainly not presented as an austere killjoy. In presenting Jesus this way, we are given an important glimpse into his priorities. And throughout the Gospels we hear the resounding echo of Jesus's promise of abundant life.

I remember hearing the story of some Westerners who were traveling through the Central African jungle. They had hired some local Africans to help them trek through the almost impenetrable jungle as quickly as possible. They had traveled for several days at a considerable pace, covering a good distance. One day, as they prepared to set off for another day's journey, they found their local African guides sitting and resting and could not persuade them to get up. Confused, they asked for an explanation. The reply was that they needed to rest all day so that their souls could catch up with their bodies.

The writer of the Book of Ecclesiastes attempts to defend faith in a generous, life-giving God by pointing to the meaninglessness and grimness of the alternative. He considers the theme of pleasure, beauty, God's gifts, and joy. In doing so, he demonstrates that it is possible to receive the gift of life's enjoyment from the hand of God and fully revel in God's creation. The Middle Eastern sage writes, "A person can do no better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God." Eating, drinking and working symbolize the totality of life. The wise sage is saying that we are inherently created to enjoy life. He is in effect saying that the Creator's fundamental disposition is one of joy, and that God's primary action toward us is one of giving.

However, paradoxically, the author of Ecclesiastes further observes

“ Living God's gift of life to the fullest, means allowing time for relishing the present moment—time for laughter and play.”

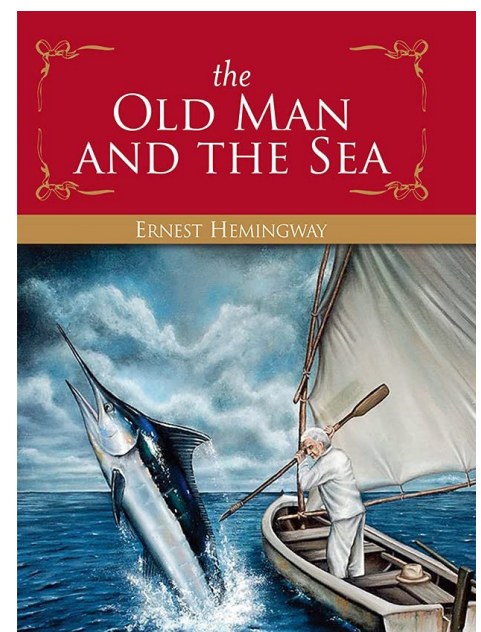
that in the balance of life, laughter and dance go hand in hand with crying and mourning. During life's phases, whether in ease or hardship, the enjoyment of God's gifts is the approach to life he encourages - to savor life in every possible way, in all its manifestations: joy and sorrow, pain and healing, success and failure, struggle and leisure, strength and weakness.

This resonates with a line by the early 20th century Lebanese American poet, mystic and artist Kahlil Gibran, best known for his book *The Prophet*. Throughout his life, he experienced profound states of both celebration and despair. Out of his life experience, he wrote, "The deeper sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain."

I have always loved Ernest Hemingway's Pulitzer Prize-winning novella, *The Old Man at the Sea*. On one level it is a tragic, albeit exciting, adventure story of an old Cuban fisherman, Santiago, and a young Cuban boy, Manolin, and their fishing exploits - and their struggle to keep the largest marlin ever hooked. At the same time it is about how one is

capable of snatching spiritual victory from the circumstances of disaster and apparent defeat.

I remember visiting a village on the border of the jungles of Petén in northern Guatemala. While there, I was told of an elderly man living nearby who had recently experienced great suffering and was believed to be dying. He had been the village lay pastor and was highly respected and everyone was afraid of losing him. They asked me to visit him, and I



found him sitting up on a mattress on the floor, looking extremely frail, with an infectious large gap-toothed smile. In our short time together, I recall us laughing more than talking. Yet, I was given a glimpse of what he had been through. His wife of 32 years had died four months before. Of his three children, his first son died at the age of ten, hit by a truck speeding through the village. His next child, a daughter, had married and had lived in a nearby village, until one day two years prior she mysteriously died while pregnant with their second child, assumably from a snakebite. His youngest son had rejected his family and their faith and had joined some guerilla movement in the southwest part of the country. Now ill himself, the old man was about to die. Yet he sat there telling me story after story about God's faithfulness and goodness, with sincere and joyful exuberance. I had gone there to encourage him in some way, but

rather I was the one blessed. He even prayed for me and sent me on my way by reading to me Psalm 121, which begins with those beautiful words of promise; "I lift up my eyes to the hills - from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth." It was a profoundly moving experience that I will never forget.

I believe this is why the Psalms were so important to the Hebrews during their times of exile and despair. The Psalms deal with the contrasting themes of celebration and suffering, exploring the full range of joy and hardship. They highlight that in and through times of difficulty, due to God's goodness, life can be treasured all the more. The Psalms also encourage celebrating life, such as making music and dancing. Often it was through music and dancing that those given the breath of life were able to drink the cup

of life to the full. They even visualized God dancing with creation. I love how the ancient Phoenicians referred to one of their divinities as "The Lord of the Dance." I recall once attending a particularly lively worship service in Havana, Cuba, where many were dancing. And the woman next to me, pausing to catch her breath said, "You know, my Jesus always dances."

As those who follow Jesus's way, we are promised to be able to discover life in its fullest as we journey with God. The daily challenges of life that we experience may not necessarily change, but we are invited to see reality through the lens of God's sustaining presence. Regardless of the state of life we find ourselves in, we are promised that our continual life-giving God is present.

Take hope,
+Paul-Gordon



Ancient city ruins in the El Petén rainforest, Guatemala