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## Baccalaureate sermon

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# Baccalaureate Sermon<sup>1</sup>

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**Texts: Revelation 1:18; John 10:10**

A number of events and incidents in recent weeks have served to determine and to shape this sermon. About eleven weeks ago—just prior to the beginning of the Lenten season—I bought and read the book, *Christ is Alive* by Michel Quoist, a Roman Catholic priest. I became absorbed in the book the moment I read these words in the forward,

We are never too optimistic when we believe in the Risen Christ living His mystery at the very heart of the world. I think the gravest sin of Christians today is fear. Evil, sin, death—we must keep those things in mind, of course: but beyond them, and in the same glance, we must see Christ victorious. Many people say, "Everything is falling apart. A world is passing away." But I say, "A world is being born." Death exists, but Jesus Christ has conquered death. Christ is alive.<sup>2</sup>

This week I attended a pastors' study conference at Lutheran Theological Seminary on the University campus in Saskatoon. We listened to the lectures of four university professors on the general theme, "The technological revolution and the church". Dr. Lyle Larson, Professor of Sociology at the University of Alberta, and expert on family life, zeroed in on family life in four lectures and showed how the technological revolution is affecting and changing family living. What he had to say about marriage and family living was not very encouraging, and when he was through he made it known that he had come not to offer us solutions but merely to show us what family life is like and where it is hurting most today. The implication was that pastors and members of the church hurry and come up with some solutions.

Then three University of Saskatchewan professors in separate lectures dealt with the subject of "The ecological consequences of the technological revolution". The three lecturers were Dr. W.K. Braun, Associate Professor of Geological Sciences, who was born and educated in Germany, Dr. J.S. Rowe, Professor in the Department of Plant Ecology, and Dr. Maureen Reeve, Assistant Professor of Biology, and an alumnus of Luther College. In a panel discussion they were asked, "How critical are the pollution and population explosion and related problems? Is what some scientists say really so, namely, that humans have only about 40 more years left before they will destroy themselves either by starvation or by pollution?" The three learned professors would neither say that it was so nor that it wasn't so. But all of them made it perfectly clear that the problem is critical—that time is running out—that eventually it has to be faced. They told us that there must be some radical changes in attitudes and life styles, that pollution is a symptom of a faulty value system, that rich nations like Canada must throttle down their use of raw materials and share them with the poorer and overpopulated nations. They said that we cannot go on doing our own thing, that we cannot go on living unrestrainedly and selfishly as if there were no tomorrow, that we will have to surrender some of our cherished freedoms and pleasures for the sake of the common good. They were agreed that we cannot hope for political solutions because no government could expect to be reelected if it really took the steps that need to be taken to avert catastrophe.

I submit that this is hardly a prospect and a future that will make any person, young or old, jump for joy and say, "Thank God for letting me live in this world of yours." I would like to tell myself, and to tell you, that the three professors we listened to didn't know what they were talking about; but then I read statements like this by other scientists. For example, Dr. Paul B. Sears, an American ecologist and conservationist, writes in the book, *This Little Planet*, "The rebels are right in being pessimists; I do not think they are pessimistic enough. To me it seems possible that the new amount of technological power let loose in an overcrowded world may overload any system we devise for its control; the possibility of a complete and apocalyptic end of civilization cannot be dismissed as a morbid fancy." In the same book, Dr. William G. Pollard, a physicist, writes,

There is much in the present predicament of man [sic] and his planet which suggests a Greek tragedy. The path ahead unfolds with a terrible inevitability toward a doom which we do not know how to avoid or escape. The great whirlpool has already gained so much momentum and turns so fast that we do not see any way to stop it. In the end, when it has devoured the earth and the rest of nature, will it not at last suck man, too, into its black and bottomless maw? There is nothing I can point to of what can be foreseen from the present situation which offers any hope of a way out of this awful dilemma.

But Pollard doesn't stop there, thank God he doesn't! Thank God he continues; "Yet I do have a genuine and confident hope in the ultimate outcome. Necessarily it is a religious hope, since it must count on completely unforeseeable developments....Admittedly it will take a miracle to save man, but my hope is grounded in an expectation of just such a miracle." And then he writes,

Even with this ultimate hope, however, I do not believe there will be any escape from the agony which awaits us in the immediate future. As we are crowded and compressed together in the next decade or two, there are bound to be social paroxysms of an intensity very much greater than any we have experienced so far. Sooner or later before the end of the century, catastrophic famine, with its attendant threat of epidemic disease and disruption of established order, is highly probable. The last third of the 20th century will surely be a time of judgement for man of a severity far greater than any of our species has ever before experienced. Much that we hold dear and have long cherished will be destroyed, never to be recovered. It is the way of the cross for the whole of mankind on the planet. But beyond the cross is Easter; that is the hope.

Now I want to return to something Dr. Braun said when he was asked, "What can the church do about the ecological problems?" He replied, "I would hate to see the church stepping into the quicksand by making pronouncements on ecology or by getting involved as a church in ecological conferences—the church has a much greater function to perform than to run around to pollution conferences; you are the only ones who have a message of hope." He didn't say another thing at the time in words, but the manner in which he then looked at us in silence said plenty. I and those who were present heard him say as he looked at us in silence, "Church, for the sake of humankind, tend to your own knitting and proclaim the message of hope which the Lord has entrusted to you. Get out and proclaim the Word of God—the Gospel—which is the only power

that can change people's attitudes and manner of living—for unless people are really changed there is no hope for human survival.”

I must mention one more thing that happened in the last few weeks—that has played a large part in determining and moulding my message. Two weeks ago the Christian church celebrated Easter—the festival of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Christians met in church buildings throughout the world jubilantly to sing the church's Easter song of triumph: Hallelujah! Jesus lives! Many a preacher's sermon resounded with extra joy and power. This preacher, among other things, said to his Easter congregation: “I stand before you on this Easter morn to announce and to proclaim with all the persuasiveness and power that God gives me: Christ who was crucified, who died, and was buried on Good Friday is alive! And what is more, he is alive not only in heaven but above all in this world of ours. He is alive and is just as truly present in our worship service, in our homes, in our city, and in our world as we are, you and I who are truly present in this Easter worship service. Christ is alive, and it is only because he is alive that we have good news to proclaim on Easter day or on any other day. Christ is alive! O let us believe it! Let us tell it! Let us show it!”

Today I am here to announce and to proclaim once more: Christ is alive! Christ lives among us today, and he lives among us so that, in his own words, “We may have life, and have it abundantly.” Yes, he lives among us, and he offers us life—the abundant life here and now and forever. But he offers it to us only on his terms, and not on ours. What are his terms? Time will not permit me to spell them all out; let me mention a few of his terms which are basic. Listen as the living Lord Jesus speaks to us and says, “one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” “One's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” “Life is more than food, and the body more than clothing.” “Seek first the kingdom of God and [God's] righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.” “Whoever would be great among you must be

your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave; even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another." "Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, happy are you if you do them." These are some of Christ's terms—some of his conditions for the abundant life.

Christ is alive! Christ alone can change the attitudes and lives of people—and only as people's attitudes and manner of living are radically changed can there be any hope for human survival.

I believe it with all my heart that the few people who are gathered here today can serve to be a greater blessing to human-kind than Apollo 16 and the three astronauts who took off for the moon around noon today. Will we be such a people? Will we be such a blessing? We will if we truly believe that Christ is alive and that he lives among us today to remould and remake us so that we may be used by him to bring new life and new hope to a world that stands tottering on the brink of self-destruction.

Christ is alive! And he will hear and wonderfully answer our prayer when we pray,

Have thine own way, Lord!

Have thine own way!

Thou art the potter;

I am the clay.

Mould me and make me

After thy will,

While I am waiting,

Yielded and still.

O living Christ, come live in us and through us so that people everywhere may have hope and life—the abundant life. Amen.

To the King of ages, immortal, invisible,  
the only God,

be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This sermon was preached 20 years ago at Luther College, Regina, Saskatchewan, on 16 April 1972. It is of significant interest for at least two reasons. It is a sampling of a deeply respected and influential Canadian Lutheran pastor, now retired. Prophetically it was an early trumpet calling on the church's and an emerging generation's attention to the degradation of the planet. The fact that the sermon is still astonishingly relevant is, to say the least, sobering. It is presented here with some minor editing in the interests of brevity and inclusiveness of language [Editor].
- <sup>2</sup> Michel Quoist, *Christ is Alive* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971).