Jesus said “I give them eternal life, and they will never perish.” There are plenty of surveys around today which show that the majority of people in Europe believe in life after death. Even as church attendance and formal religious belief has declined, many, many people are still convinced that there is something beyond this life that we will enter into after our death. However if you push beyond that basic statement, you find an enormous amount of confusion about what exactly that means: what will happen to us, what it will be like.

Of course in the church we are very firm in this belief and we know exactly what we mean by “eternal life”. We have plenty of passages in our New Testament that speak of life beyond this life. John’s gospel alone offers us the following: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16) "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life... (John 5:24 ) Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you." (John 6:27) And from today’s reading: I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. (John 10:28)

The hope of life eternal life has always been a key feature of the good news of our Christian gospel. It is what we believe and what we proclaim. I’m sure most of us will have been at funeral Services at which the minister or priest has spoken of the “sure and certain hope of resurrection to eternal life”. This bold and confident language is of course based on our Easter faith, our conviction that Christ has faced death on our behalf and has conquered it on our behalf, therefore as he has been raised so we too, in turn, may be raised to eternal life.

It is built also on our understanding of the nature of God, both as that is revealed to us the stories of the bible, and as we experience in our own joys and struggle’s. God is love, and he loves his people, and therefore it is natural to believe that he will not simply do away with us but will to draw us to himself. And when the all powerful one does all that he can, we have every reason to be assured.
I think this faith is also built on an inner sense that however much we may learn in this world, and however much we may develop as people, there has to be something more. There are injustices in this world that need to be put right, there is damage done to our personality that needs to be healed, there is a relationship with God that is still so limited that it must be brought to completion. So much within us tells us that this is right. And we have the clear promise of Jesus that he gives us eternal life. This is why I say that in the church we are very firm in this belief and we know exactly what we mean by it.

But the second half of that statement might not be entirely true. For on those occasions, which seem increasingly rare, when we actually talk about this subject, we too find that we have plenty of questions, plenty of uncertainty. What does eternal life look like? How do we understand it? What exactly do we mean when we talk about the Christian hope of eternal life?

There is a kind of cartoon image of heaven which would have us sitting around on the clouds playing harps, while occasionally looking down and tutting at what the world is coming to. Now I sincerely hope that is not an accurate image, because I don’t have a very good head for heights and I really don’t fancy being perched on a cloud for five minutes, never mind all eternity.

The more common and more serious understanding is probably that when we slip away from our physical bodies we find ourselves instead in a place of peace, perhaps a place where we have no bodies, a place that is difficult if not impossible to locate, but which will seem very far from this world, with all its corruption, its stress and strain. But there is a problem here too, for the New Testament distinctly teaches about the resurrection of the body. In Romans we read: “we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.” (Romans 8:23) The rest of New Testament, where it touches on the subject, uses similar language.
The image bodiless spirits floating around owes more to the ancient Greek philosophy of Plato and his colleagues than it does to the bible. They understood the physical world to be incompatible with a holy and all powerful God, and so believed to be near God must mean leaving all such things behind, the physical world, our physical bodies, the whole lot. But we believe that far from God despising the physical world, he created it, and that while it has always slipped away from his original purposes, his actions have always been to redeem and to save and to call back. We believe that he is a God who became incarnate, who chose to enter into his creation and be part of it, because he cares for it so much. And of course, the model of resurrection life that we see in Jesus most definitely involves him having a body.

So if it is not sitting around on clouds, and it is not floating around somewhere in outer space, how are we to understand the eternal life that Jesus gives us? Well I certainly don’t claim to have any exclusive knowledge to reveal this morning, but I think that to make proper sense of it we have to start looking at it differently. We tend to think of eternal life from a rather self-centred perspective. That is no surprise, and there is nothing wrong with worrying about our own eternal destiny. In fact I think we could do with worrying about that a bit more. But to imagine that Jesus work on earth was all about finding an escape route to allow me to avoid punishment so that I could go to heaven, is just too small a picture for the huge things he was doing and claiming. And a religious faith which has as its centre a desire for a personal escape from an evil world while having no concern for the world or for anyone else, doesn’t really seem worthy of Jesus Christ.

For a start, Jesus does not simply teach that there is a place far away where, by his grace, we may end up in the nearer presence of God. He does say that. He says that in his Father’s house there are many mansions and that he is going there to prepare a place for us. And the vision we have from Revelation suggests that this is a big mansion “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages.” So while the eternal life that is spoken about is a vital
personal reality, it is already clear that it is not an exclusive invitation to a small private residence.

And yes, there is assurance that in that place we will be beyond the things that trouble humanity so much here and now. We are assured that in that place “They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” (Rev 7:16,17) These are wonderful words for us to hold on to. But the same book of Revelation speaks of a new heaven and a new earth. It’s vision ultimately is of a new city having been built, the “New Jerusalem” it calls it, coming from heaven to earth.

The great plan of God, it seems, is not for a lucky few to find themselves whiling away eternity among the clouds, but it is a plan for the renewal of the whole of his creation, putting right all that has gone wrong, and including us as part of the great eternal process. If we think of eternal life as a private gift that we are given for our own personal enjoyment, then I think we are reducing the promise of Christ to something far smaller, far less significant than it really is.

But if we can begin to see that God intends to renew the whole creation, and if this has already somehow begun in Jesus' resurrection, and that he invites us to participate in this eternal mission, then we discover that we are not merely saved for our pleasure, but saved for a purpose. Indeed we discover that this eternal life is not something which will commence after we die, but that it is something we can enter into today. That is the clear teaching of the New Testament. We know that we have passed from death to life… (1 John 3:14) Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! (2 Corinthians 5:17) New creation has already started. It began with the resurrection of Jesus, it continues in the mission of his church, and its completion is the sure and certain promise that we cling to.
Eternal life means just that. It is life, not merely existing in some half formed way. It means having an endless part to play in a divine plan which is eternal in scale. So I think we are getting it the wrong way round if we talk about a hope for heaven, and then mumble about what it all might mean. Rather we should be sure and certain of what it all means, and then perhaps mumble a bit about how it will be heavenly because Christ will be in charge and that is really the definition of heaven anyway. Because our hope is not self centred but it is Christ centred, and that is surely the right way around. For it is he who gives us eternal life and he who will bring all things to completion. (see Philippians 1: 6)

This is the assurance of our faith, and the assurance that we can start living by today.